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ABSTRACT

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned this study to examine collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs), further education colleges (FECs), and other education institutions, community groups, and regional agencies. Research was conducted in 25 regional partnerships funded by HEFCE as part of the widening participation special funding program. A particular focus was the initial 1-year research projects and, where applicable, the second phase projects. This report discusses the response of the HEIs and FECs to the HEFCE initiative and the process of creating partnerships and ongoing operation. The outcomes of collaboration are outlined, and key issues and problems involved in relation to regional collaboration are described. Many of the partnerships lacked a coherent vision, but coherent partnerships were shown to improve operation through shared vision, good practice, and the creation of new bridging organizations. Most of the newly formed partnerships were not in a position to consider the impact of their collaborative activities, but case studies have demonstrated the potential for collaboration to widen participation in higher education. Findings suggest that the HEFCE should be more prescriptive about key components of partnerships and provide guidance and assistance with strategic issues. Two appendixes contain the survey and interview protocol used at the regional partnerships. (Contains 29 references.) (SLD)

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Evaluation of collaboration between HEIs and FECs to increase participation in higher education

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Report to HEFCE by the Institute for Access Studies, Staffordshire University

March 2003

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1. Executive summary

Background

This report was commissioned by HEFCE to examine collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs), further education colleges (FECs) and other education institutions, community groups and regional agencies. The aim is to try to widen participation in higher education by students who are currently under-represented in HE.

Research was conducted in the 25 regional partnerships funded by HEFCE as part of the widening participation special funding programme for 1998-99 (HEFCE 99/07). In particular, research focused on the initial one-year research projects (HEFCE 98/35 and 99/07) and, where applicable, the subsequent second phase projects (HEFCE 99/33).

There are four main sections of the report:

- responses of HEIs and FECs to the HEFCE initiative
- the process of creating partnerships and ongoing operation
- outcomes of collaboration
- key issues and problems involved in relation to regional collaboration.

Key messages

Creation and operation of partnerships

Creating partnerships:

- Institutions participate in regional partnerships for a number of reasons, which can be categorised as evangelism, pragmatism, market imperatives and synergy, but 'market imperatives' seem to dominate.
- Approximately a quarter of the partnerships consulted communities when establishing and developing these partnerships.

Management and administration:

- All partnerships have a steering group (or equivalent) that determines strategic direction. Some partnerships have additional advisory and/or practitioner groups.
- Some partnerships have limited the size of the partnership, or membership of the main decision-making body, but sub-groups, (e.g. for practitioners) have proved useful.
- Effective partnerships have central administrators and ensure this aspect of the partnership is well resourced.

Building coherency:

- A coherent partnership can improve its operation through: developing a shared vision; sharing good practice; creating a new bridging organisation.
- Many partnerships lacked a shared vision, and frequently did not even have an agreed mission statement. There was a call for more guidance from HEFCE.

Communication:

- The need for effective communication was stressed throughout the research. Three levels of communication are examined in this report: between partnership members, within institutions and externally.

Outcomes of collaboration

Activities in the first phase:

- There were three categories of research undertaken in the first project phase: mapping activities in the region; research about specific target groups; piloting initiatives.

Influence of research on project development:

- There were four identified levels of interrelationship between phase one and subsequent phase two projects: phase two initiatives built directly from phase one research; research confirmed what was already known; research findings did not directly impact on the project; the research was not used.

Second phase activities:

- Most of the newly-formed partnerships are not in a position to consider the impact of their collaborative activities, but a case study demonstrates the potential for collaboration between further and higher education to widen participation.
- Strategies to achieve progression from further education into higher education include: creating links between each stage of the curriculum; the provision of advice and guidance to students; staff and student visits; progression agreements that are confirmed with students; top-up degrees that map onto HND programmes; and the opening of a university HE centre within an FEC.
- In the case study, transition from FE to HE is not viewed as problematic, and is facilitated by: improving staff awareness that previous course content may differ; ensuring a better match between articulated courses; providing an induction for new students; and (informal) peer mentors.
- Within all partnerships, monitoring, evaluation and tracking systems were largely underdeveloped or non-existent.

Issues in regional collaboration to widen participation

- There is a tension between collaboration and competition within partnerships, (although not necessarily between all partners).
- Partnerships differed in scale, but a sense of geographical identity (i.e. a natural region) was seen to be important; but whatever the size of the region, local initiatives to involve potential students proved invaluable.
- FE is rarely a full partner. It is usually a stakeholder involved in certain initiatives or an adviser brought in to help the partnership target its initiative. In this way they are often 'used', but they do not experience equal status within the partnership, and yet they offer excellent progression routes for students into HE.
- The overwhelming response from partnerships is that collaboration is an effective way to widen participation. However there is a danger that initiatives to widen participation are short-term, and that the benefits do not last beyond the funding period so genuine change is not achieved.

- There is strong support within the partnerships that they should continue beyond the funding period, but the main concern is securing further finance and only in some instances were the opportunities for further funding recognised.

Recommendations

- Overall, there seems to be agreement that HEFCE should be more prescriptive about key components of partnerships, and provide guidance and assistance with strategic issues.

Scope of regional collaboration:
- There should be greater recognition of the tension between competition and collaboration within regional partnerships.
- Regional and local co-ordination rather than co-operation should be encouraged with regard to activities directly related to HE recruitment.
- Co-operation should be encouraged in non-competitive arenas, e.g. working with younger children and building links with 'hard to reach groups'.
- It should be recognised that there is a need for both regional and local activity, and funding and partnership structures should take account of this.

Membership
- Partners should be selected carefully to take account of the aims and objectives of the partnership.
- Partnerships should be encouraged to involve FE as full partners, and not to make assumptions about what they can contribute and how they can benefit from collaboration.
- Consideration should be given to involving community representatives in the management, research and implementation of partnerships.
- External 'observers' and members of other regional networks should be invited to join the steering committee to provide a broader context and to offer advice (e.g. in relation to regional strategy, funding opportunities etc).

Management and administration
- Time should be spent early on in partnership formation to identify a clear mission statement and shared vision, which is agreed in writing by all partners.
- Partnerships need a clear management structure, which is non-hierarchical and facilitates open and transparent decision making.
- Roles and responsibilities should be agreed in writing by the partnership and be 'signed off' by each organisation.
- Partnerships need dedicated central administration, and HEFCE should provide funding for this.
- Partnerships should develop a communication strategy to promote effective communication across the partnership, within partner institutions and with other agencies in the region or sub-region. (See section 4.4. for further details.)

Building coherency
- Partnerships should consider how they are going to build coherency, and develop clear steps to do this (see section 4.3).
- Strategies for developing coherence within the community, such as an ongoing research strand, should be spelt out and embedded.

- HEFCE should encourage partnerships to include mechanisms for the sharing of good practice, and provide funding to support such activities.
- HEFCE should facilitate inter-partnership learning, e.g. through the organisation of regional seminars.
- Partnerships should be encouraged and facilitated to examine their organisational structure, and if appropriate, to create a new bridging organisation.

Research and project development

- Pre-project research should inform initiatives and projects and it should continue into subsequent funding phases to ensure target groups are correct and are being reached.
- HEFCE should ensure that funded pre-project research has been carried out before approving further funding.
- HEFCE should seek to strengthen links between research and project implementation at all levels of partnerships.
- HEFCE should make available information on WP. This should include data to assist in identifying under-represented student groups and details of existing partnerships and projects.

Monitoring and evaluation

- HEFCE must take greater responsibility for monitoring, evaluation and tracking.
- Project funding proposals should address specific questions about monitoring, evaluation and tracking.
- Funding should be explicitly provided for these activities.
- Action on Access and HEFCE regional consultants should provide guidance about monitoring and evaluation systems.
- Training should be provided to practitioners and steering committees about possible approaches to monitoring and evaluation (this should take place before projects commence).
- HEFCE should consider developing monitoring, evaluation and tracking tools that could be adapted and used by partnerships and institutions to assess the impact of their widening participation policies and practices.
- Evaluation should be both formative and summative, and should utilise both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

Sustainability

- There is mismatch between bidding for funding and developing long-term approaches to widening participation, and thus partnerships should have opportunities to access more secure sources of income.
- Widening participation staff need greater employment security and career development opportunities, otherwise they will not continue to work in the field.
- Partnerships need to build sustainability into their strategic planning, and original funding proposals should address this issue, or alternatively provide an 'exit strategy'.

2. Introduction

This evaluation research examines collaboration, or co-operation, between higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) (and other education institutions, community groups and regional agencies) in attempts to widen participation in higher education by students who are currently under-represented in HE. (These may include students from low-income groups, students with disabilities, students from ethnic and minority groups, mature students, students with non-traditional entry qualifications and students from rural and isolated areas). The focus of the research is the 25 HEFCE-funded regional partnerships, and in particular it considers the initial one-year research projects (see HEFCE publications 98/35 and 99/07) and, where applicable, the subsequent second phase projects (HEFCE 99/33 and 00/35). The evaluation has critically examined the processes of co-operation and the impact of collaboration, and has sought to identify and explore good practice to share with other partnerships.

2.1 Context

1997 saw 80 per cent of young people from social class I enter higher education, against 14 per cent of those from class V. For those with disabilities – who constitute 12.5 per cent of the population – the rate of participation was 4 per cent (all statistics from CVCP, 1999). Various commentators (c.f. Kennedy, 1997; CVCP, 1999; Woodrow, 1999; and Bekhradnia, 2000a and b) have drawn attention to these disparities. Furthermore, access rates do not directly translate into successful completion and progression rates. Efforts to address low participation by particular social and cultural groups have often cited partnership and collaboration as fundamental:

> "... while individual projects can do excellent work, there are additional benefits if the work is co-ordinated and good practice is shared" (HEFCE, preface in Harrison *et al*, 2000, p8).

The HEFCE, the Learning Skills Council (LSC), government policy (e.g. DfEE, 1999) and high profile reports (e.g. Kennedy, 1997, Select Committee on Education and Employment, 2001) all provide a strong steer towards collaboration and partnerships amongst local and regional providers to assist with widening participation and student progression. Competition may be viewed as antithetical to this task, and thus collaboration is seen as the antidote. Whilst this research views partnerships as broadly positive, it has sought to examine problematic areas too.

> "Co-operation is...often seen as the opposite of competition. On its positive side it is seen as a process of consensus-building and sharing in public action. However,...talk of co-operation frequently disguises power relations in the name of equality" (Robinson, Hewitt and Harriss, 2000, p8).

There are difficult questions to be faced, such as: Does co-operation work and what is achieved? Who collaborates? What are the models for collaboration, and which are the most successful? What are the tensions between partners? What happens after the end of the initial funding period?

2.2 Objectives of the research

This research focuses on the 25 partnerships funded by HEFCE as part of the

widening participation special funding programme for 1998-99 (HEFCE 99/07). The initial invitation (HEFCE 98/35) called for proposals from HEIs to build partnerships between themselves and other organisations and institutions (including FECs) to widen participation in higher education. The invitation stated that funds would be allocated to partnerships that would "address low demand from under-represented groups by encouraging progression into and within higher education". Proposals were intended to respond to regional and local need as identified by HEFCE and to promote a long-term commitment to widening participation within institutions. In addition the following aims were outlined:

- To encourage HEIs to be more proactive in stimulating demand from under-represented groups;
- HEIs could address low demand by working in partnership with organisations such as schools, FECs, employers and community development bodies to stimulate and facilitate progression into and within higher education;
- Focusing on the regional (in addition to the local) aspect of widening participation opens up the possibility of synergy with other regional funding opportunities.

HEIs and other stakeholders were encouraged to take a strategic approach that would aim to provide a framework for future projects. It was suggested that this might include analysing need (e.g. mapping existing partnerships and initiatives, investigating perceptions of higher education within target groups); developing partnerships (e.g. setting objectives and priorities, establishing responsibilities etc); and building capacity (e.g. developing staff awareness of, and commitment to widening participation, establishing monitoring mechanisms). Successful partnerships (HEFCE 99/07) were funded to operate on both a regional and sub-regional level in what is referred to as Phase 1 (1998-99). An invitation to apply for continued funding was published by HEFCE in 1999 (HEFCE 99/33). Successful Phase 2 bids are detailed in HEFCE 00/35.

The primary objectives of this evaluation research are:

- To describe the response of HEIs and FECs to the initiative;
- To consider the ways in which successful partnerships have been developed;
- To categorise the research and other activities that took place during the first phase;
- To examine the links between first phase and second phase projects (where applicable);
- To consider the impact of collaboration, including an examination of monitoring, evaluation and tracking procedures;
- To explore the significance of a regional approach to widening participation.

2.3 Research methods

The evaluation combines a number of research methods: document analysis, a survey of all partnerships and eight case studies. This research strategy provided details about the majority of partnerships, whilst facilitating the in-depth examination of particular consortia, thus we were able to examine the issues at the national, regional and institutional levels. Document analysis involved examining initial applications, research reports, second-stage funding applications and other partnership material.

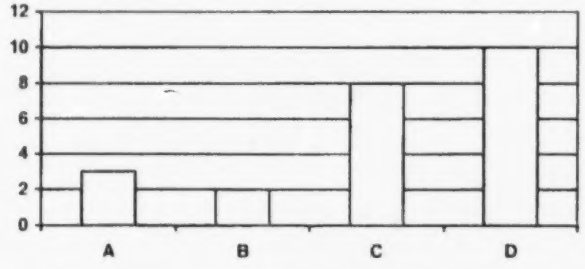
A survey (see Appendix 1) was sent to the lead institution of all the regional partnerships. Of the 25 partnerships contacted, 15 returned completed questionnaires

or related documents. Information on a further six partnerships was drawn from a number of alternative sources: initial bids and reports submitted in Phase 1 and additional documentation received from partnerships. (Two of these partnerships have now combined and for the purposes of this survey information has been assigned to the 'new' partnership; figures quoted therefore refer to a total of 24 partnerships.) The remaining four partnerships either failed to respond to the survey and subsequent requests, or felt unable to provide any relevant information due to staff changes. In reality, a range of different people completed the questionnaires, either because the originally named contact person had moved on, or because the task was delegated to a colleague. In one instance that we are aware of, the survey was completed collectively.

A significant aspect of the research was the eight case studies, which utilised semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 2) with representatives from different organisations and with different roles within the partnerships. The case studies were selected to provide insight into a range of different types of partnerships, including rural and urban regions, established and newly formed liaisons, and regional and sub-regional collaboration. Two members of the research team visited each of the selected regional partnerships, and undertook interviews with key personnel including project managers, senior staff and project officers in different institutions.

3. Responses of HEIs and FECs to the initiative

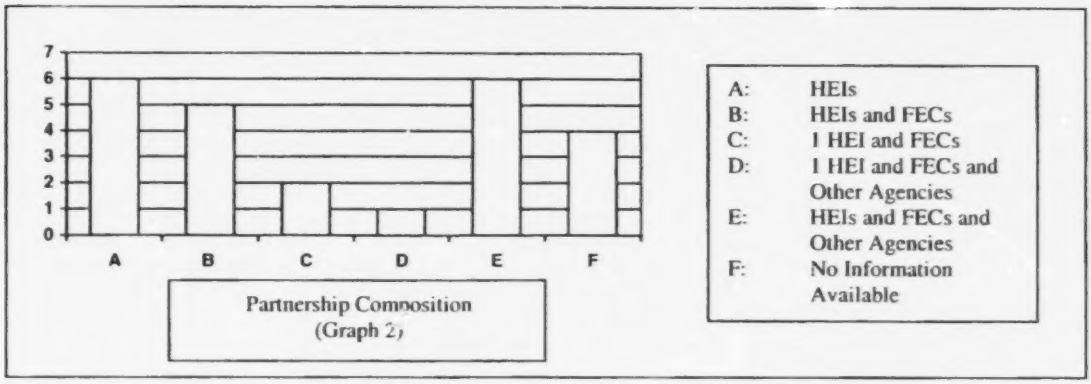
Overall, 10 of the partnerships were formed specifically in response to the invitation from HEFCE to apply for funding in Phase 1 (HEFCE 98/35 - Graph 1). A further eight partnerships had been involved in some form of collaboration with partner members prior to submitting a bid for this funding, and five already existed, three of these for more than five years.



Partnership formation in response to Phase 1 funding (Graph 1)

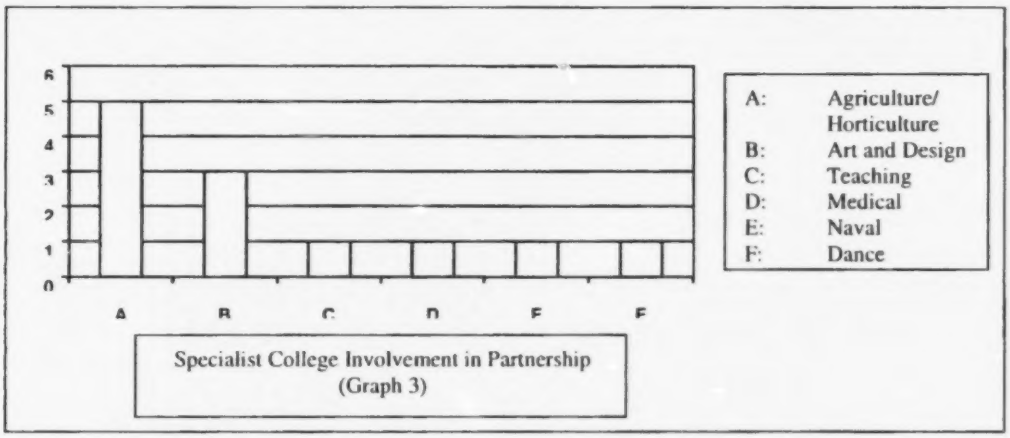
A: Partnerships already established (for over 5 years)
B: Partnerships already established (less than 5 years)
C: Partnerships already collaborating
D: Partnerships set up specifically for Phase 1 bid

Partnership membership took a variety of forms (see Graph 2). The majority of partnerships were made up of combinations of: HEIs; HEIs and FECs; or HEIs, FECs and other agencies (for example Open College networks, careers services or Training and Enterprise Councils).



Partnership Composition
(Graph 2)

Only six partnerships included collaboration with 'elite' institutions. Ten of the partnerships included specialist colleges, as illustrated in Graph 3. Three of these collaborated with more than one specialist college.



Specialist College Involvement in Partnership
(Graph 3)

The majority of partnerships (19) carried out some form of research activity in Phase 1. In practice this ranged from basic mapping exercises to in-depth research involving various target groups. However, only six partnerships engaged in research that included consultation with local communities.

4. Creation and operation of partnerships

There is increasing reference to the value or benefits of partnerships and related "buzz-words", which "crop up continually in discussions of the business world, in government and in non-governmental organisations" (Harriss, 2000, p226). But there is a danger that 'frequency' masks 'complexity', both of motivations and practices.

Robinson, *et al* (2000) assert that: "Despite the positive story which is widely repeated about the benefits of inter-agency collaboration, discussion about the policy and practice of such relationships is limited" (op cit, p15). This part of the report

therefore explores the ways in which partnerships were created, and examines their operation, with the aim of providing insight and ultimately guidance for the development of partnerships, both generally and more specifically in relation to widening participation. It is divided into four sections: creating partnerships; models of management and administration; building a coherent approach; and effective communication.

4.1 Creating partnerships

Most partnerships were set up in response to the original HEFCE invitation to tender for funding (see section 3, above). Usually one institution initiated the process, either by looking for interested partners, or identifying bodies that 'ought' to be involved. It should however be recalled that many institutions (especially the 'lead' HEIs) already had relationships with other regional and local education providers. Sometimes these liaisons were comparatively recent (for example as a consequence of the Further Education Funding Council's *Strategic Partnerships* - see Kennedy, 1997, p35, 38, 104), while three were said to have existed for five or more years. There was not always agreement or clarity about these issues, and so it must be surmised that in some instances the relations were relatively informal, and perhaps personal rather than institutional arrangements.

> *"Before [name of HEFCE-funded project], the partnership resulted from a variety of informal and formal contacts that we had across the region some of which relate to previous joint bids but also some of which relate to other activities that we are joint members of. There were various partnerships. Partnerships were much better developed for us in the whole region than they were in the [name of city] region at that stage. But we made a deliberate decision to try and foster links in this particular area because we knew we had to start doing that, and also within the region"* (Senior Manager, lead HEI).

(a) Selecting partners

The predominant mode of identifying partners was serendipity. For example, one partnership collected together a number of initial partners, and then held a meeting, which was attended by *"everyone"* in the sub-region, thus the initial partnership constituency was very broad. The membership was subsequently changed as the focus of the partnership became clearer. In other instances a small group was formed initially, but the number of partners increased considerably once it became clear there would be second stage funding.

In most cases there was a mix of institutions of different sizes with different histories and identities. Partners included all types of HEIs (including The Open University in some regions), FECs, specialist colleges in both the FE and HE sector, voluntary sector groups, regional or national bodies such as the Learning Skills Council (or previously Training and Enterprise Councils), the Careers Service, the local education authority (LEA), Workers Educational Association, private sector training providers, local businesses and in one instance the Fire Service. Partnerships, however, were mainly formed between the HEIs within a certain region or sub-region. None of the partnerships were led by an FEC (or any other body), and it was uncommon for the partnership to be predominantly FECs. (The relationship between further and higher education institutions is discussed towards the end of this report, as a limitation of the

regional partnerships.) In one partnership however the chair of the steering committee was not from an educational institution, to help overcome institutional bias.

Some partnerships made a conscious decision to limit the number of partners and have different categories of involvement. For example, in one partnership HEIs were 'full' partners, while FE colleges were involved, but not as primary stakeholders, and other regional bodies were observers.

> "*One of the difficulties is in an ideal world there are loads of groups you'd want involved: schools, parents. We've tended to make those links at practitioner level then report back to the Steering Group what these people want. The more you open these things up the more unwieldy it gets*" (Vice Chair of Partnership Steering Group).

Another partnership redefined itself as an *"education and training providers forum"*, and thus certain original members fell outside of this remit, while, more pertinently, private sector training providers were brought on board.

Some partnerships contained one 'elite' institution (i.e. an old, traditional university). Their level of commitment both to the partnership and to widening participation within their own institution was sometimes called into question and there was concern that these institutions had to be *"treated with kid gloves"* for fear that they might leave the partnership if they were criticised. In one case, dealing with a tricky situation was done via the *"old boys network"*, and thus perpetuated a class and gender power structure. Although it was perceived that the participation of such institutions could be extremely beneficial to young people who could access them as a consequence of the partnership, there was also resentment about their privileged position in relation to widening participation, as these steering group members agreed:

> "*Another frustrating thing is the rewards that are going to institutions that have made the least effort in widening participation.*"
>
> *"People deserve rewards for not taking the easy way out when widening participation wasn't flavour of the month."*
>
> *"I couldn't agree more. You just feel 'how frustrating'."*
> (Steering Group members)

In order to be a true partnership rather than a conglomeration of disparate and uncommitted institutions there needed to be a sense of ownership and shared vision. For this to happen there needs to be early debate and agreement on the aims and parameters of the partnership:

> "*One of the things I've learned is that discussion about the nature of the partnership should be had early on. So people are clear with one another what they expect from it both in terms of institutions and how it was going to work as a partnership that would allow people to be honest and demarcate the boundaries*" (HE Project Officer).

This topic of creating a shared vision is returned to below.

(b) Motivations for collaboration

There is a wide range of motivations for institutions to participate in regional collaboration, as the following categorisation of 'perspectives on why inter-organisational relationships matter' helps to clarify.

> "Evangelism: collaboration is a 'good thing', which should be aspired to for that reason..."
>
> "Pragmatism: in recognition of the fact that the world is becoming both smaller and more complex, and that societies and organisations are increasingly interdependent..."
>
> "Market imperatives: as the world of business organisations has become increasingly specialised..., inter-organisational arrangements are seen as key to efficiency and competitiveness (co-operation for competitiveness)"
>
> "Synergy: the idea that working with other organisations enables an organisation to better achieve its objectives; that is, the achievement of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts..." (Robinson *et al*, 2000, p14).

Indeed, the partners had varying motives for taking part, although these were less discrete than the above categorisation would suggest; and within the same partnerships, members would espouse different motivations. On balance however, 'market imperatives' seem to dominate.

For some more traditional universities, who had been forced to address widening participation issues for the first time, partnership was, perhaps rather pragmatically, viewed as an opportunity to learn from others who were more developed in their widening participation practice.

Others viewed collaboration as having benefits for all partners. For example, a senior manager from FE described a number of ways in which both the university and the FE colleges benefited from their liaisons. It is interesting to note that this is a well-established partnership, where partners have been working together for a longer period of time.

> *"Working together and being aware of developments is a learning process in its own right for the institute... You're meeting people at meetings and you're understanding their agendas and understanding issues at their meetings, and there's development in terms of synergy about you how you can tackle things together ... There are projects coming up where you think ... that particular college would be useful for us to work with in terms of this development and you wouldn't get that otherwise because you wouldn't necessarily know them otherwise or what they were doing"* (Senior Manager, FE Institute).

The project manager based at the lead HEI reinforced these claims: *"This is not just about outsourcing expertise but bringing in the expertise that the partner institutions have"* (Senior Manager and Project Manager, lead HEI).

Similarly, a member of another well-established partnership made insights about synergy and mutual benefits:

> *"... we all recognise that we all have different strengths, if you look at the [name of project] we are playing to each institution's strengths, and by recognising this we can put these together ... we are pursuing our own agendas but we also get a lot from each other too"* (Steering Group member).

For others, usually post-1992 institutions, partnership was a logical progression to their work in the field and very much tied to issues of recruitment within the locality. In order to survive as institutions they had to maximise their intake from their most likely customers - local students: *"Widening participation is a function of geography as far as the university is concerned"*. The 'market imperative' driving co-operation was stressed even more explicitly by a senior manager in another HEI:

> *"No, no it would be in existence anyway! And we're already looking for opportunities to develop it outside of that fund because we think it's got a lot of mileage. To be quite honest, in the future, in order to get critical mass we have to collaborate because in the long term we're competing not just with universities in this country but also through new technologies countries elsewhere. As simple as that, it's a global market for education, that's what e-university is also about"* (Senior Manager, lead-HEI, who wrote partnership bids submitted to HEFCE).

In a similar vein, some saw regional partnerships as offering an opportunity to raise their profile and to take up a position as key regional decision-makers. Smaller institutions, such as hybrid HE/FE colleges, used the partnership to improve their status and give their students an incentive to progress outside of their immediate locality. *"It gives us a wider platform. It helps people to see that we're not just a small college in a backwater"* (FE/HE Project Officer Rural Partnership).

Others hoped, perhaps as evangelists do, that the partnership would overcome the negative consequences of competition. For example, one practitioner spoke of what s/he hoped would be the advantages of collaboration, but s/he seems only too aware that this is not the main motivation of the majority of the institutional partners:

> *"Where I've come from, I saw not only HE and FE competing for students, but also schools, sixth forms, training providers, local employers competing for students, and it seemed very devisive and not always in the best interest of students, and so this is overturning this approach. It seems almost impossible, doesn't it, to think that institutions can be altruistic enough because obviously they want students, students are their bread and butter, their income, their research development and everything? So I see it as a very client centred service and I like to think that we're all pulling together to fulfil the aims and objectives of the project which is to increase participation, in [name of region]... I sense that other project officers are under more pressure, it hasn't been explicit, but I sense that other project officers*

are seen as the recruiting arm for their institutions" (Project Officer, specialist college).

This overview of some of the motivations for collaboration demonstrates a mix of perspectives, but these must be characterised as largely self-interested. It is therefore not surprising that for all institutions the resource element was vital. Each of the partners felt that collaborative activity could not be resourced internally, and thus the HEFCE funding was imperative. The funding enabled them to be innovative and creative and make significant changes to their provision, for example in terms of experimental outreach programmes.

(c) Involving the community

Approximately a quarter of the partnerships consulted the communities in relation to establishing and developing these partnerships. There appears to be a correlation between the involvement of FE partners and outreach activity, which would confirm the often repeated view from FE participants that FE has much stronger local links than HE. This idea was made explicit in one partnership, in which the lead HEI made a definite decision not to directly undertake community-work as there are other agencies already doing this, including the FECs. For the HEI to undertake similar work would have been *"muddying the waters"*, so they concentrated on liaising with colleges.

Steering and advisory groups rarely include community members, and research tends to be with either participants or practitioners not the community as a whole. Those partnerships which did attempt to involve voluntary/community groups in their steering or advisory groups experienced great difficulties, and acknowledged that it was unlikely to get people to participate in formal meetings. A more participative outreach model was needed but as yet they had not attempted this. There were other instances where partnerships tried to involve a more diverse range of contributors, including schools, to develop two-way communication about the partnership.

> *"We had a number of meetings with schools. We had certain parameters, but we asked the community if they wanted to be involved: rather than HE going in saying 'we're working with you' we asked, for example, The Head Teachers Association who wanted to be involved, so they had some kind of say in what we were doing as well... We went to the [Regional] Association of Colleges and asked who wanted to be involved, and that's important that they don't feel that HE takes over. It's about finding an equitable way of doing things that overcomes political sensitivities"* (Steering Group Member).

Within this partnership there was evidence that the Steering Group responded quickly to suggestions made, but also a feeling amongst participants that the partnership still tended to operate from an authoritarian position.

4.2 Management and administration

It was widely agreed that successful partnerships needed to be well structured and managed. Some aspects of partnership working benefited from being formally agreed, while other areas gained from flexibility and informality.

> *"You can't put it down just to personalities, we do all get along very well, but it's about commitment, and we have a very strong structural*

base. I think this partnership would be just as effective with different personalities – it has to" (Steering Group members, long-standing partnership).

(a) Managing partnerships

In order for a group of diverse partners to work together as an effective partnership, a number of research participants stressed the importance of having in place a strong management framework from the beginning. All partnerships have a steering group (or equivalent) that determines or agrees the strategic direction. Some also have an advisory group made up of interested parties from relevant sectors, such as FE and other support agencies, which meets less often. In addition some projects have also found it useful to allow practitioners a separate group or groups where they can meet to discuss operational issues (and in some instances, make decisions at a grassroots level).

Generally project officers seem to welcome such an opportunity: *"You can speak more freely and you can get the issues that are important to you across"* (Project Officer). Such a forum however must be in addition to, rather than in place of, access to the main decision-making bodies. Some project officers feel that removing them from the steering group diminishes their influence on the strategic direction of the partnership, and thus is not viewed positively. In other partnerships however there are some who feel that power should and does lie at the operational level, but even where this is voiced others doubt that this is actually happening:

> *"I don't think there's much power at officer leve: nothing we suggest can be done without being sanctioned by senior management and implemented by middle management"* (FE Project Officer).

A more common approach is to value strong strategic management to which the project officers can turn for help when needed *"S/he's very pragmatic, which helps. If something urgent came up I'd approach her/him directly"* (FE/HE Project Officer).

In some partnerships management functions are shared more equally than in others. For example in some partnerships the chair is rotated, and this can be accompanied by the allocation of strategic roles to each chair. Alternatively, the chair may be elected democratically. In one partnership the project manager explained that although the role of the lead organisation is necessarily different from that of other partners, they have tried to nurture *"specialisms"* which are associated with each of the other institutions (most of which are FECs).

In other partnerships the chair is identified very strongly with the partnership, has played a crucial role in its formation and clearly feels that they are and should be in control:

> *"There's a lot to be said for rotating the chair but a lot to be said for continuity and having an overview of what's going on. At the end of the day it's not exactly a workers' co-operative and you can't run it as a workers' co-operative"* (Chair of partnership, lead HEI).

Whilst this approach is generally positively received, power being associated with a particular person can cause friction amongst some participants who find it simply "*authoritarian and paternalistic*" (HE Project Officer). Certainly it is interesting to

speculate how far the steering groups are simply rubber stamping decisions that are made elsewhere, in sub-meetings set up by the chair and vice-chair. In the right hands this model can work well but there are dangers in limiting the democracy of partnerships. Other partnerships argued that transparency and democracy are required, especially with regard to the allocation of funding for particular aspects of partnership activity.

The role of the lead or fund-holding institution is vital to the partnership. It is important to acknowledge that their financial accountability does give them a different relationship and responsibility, and essentially a vested interest in the partnership. This is commonly recognised by other partners: *"They have to do the returns and at the end of the day if they don't do it it's going to come back to them"* (HE Project Officer, non-lead HEI). When budget decisions are made openly via the steering group this prevents any possible charges of financial impropriety.

The style of the lead institution, which is often expressed through the chair, can determine the attitudes of other partners. For example in one partnership a very dominating, but fairly junior chair who gave the impression that her/his institution was *"acting autonomously without informing others"* (HE Project Officer) was replaced by a much more effective manager at a senior level whose style was praised by all for its *"transparency"*. The effect was to allay fears that the lead institution was simply using the partnership for its own ends.

The size of the partnership contributes to management issues. For example, it was noted above that one partnership found it necessary to reduce the number of members. Similarly, one partnership was trying to balance the desire to include more FECs in order to cover a larger geographical area, with the associated management difficulties:

> *"Well there are some colleges that haven't been in, in the past, mainly because they've been less involved with the existing college networks, and we will obviously try to involve them as much as we can. But there is the issue where it becomes so complex to actually manage you start to get diminishing returns setting in. If you have too many partners it becomes very difficult to manage"* (Chair of partnership, lead-HEI).

Management links to the two other sections in part 4, on building coherency and communication. For example, there are some partnerships where communication is fragmented, partners are unsure what each other is doing, and members of the partnership seem uncertain of their role, to the extent of not even knowing which groups they are targeting. There is open disagreement amongst management and project staff of the same institution about the role and future of partnership work, and suspicion that people are working to opposing agendas. The steering and advisory groups are hotbeds of open conflict between the HE institutions, which some interpret as a climate of healthy debate, but others see as damaging and unproductive:

> *"...they don't really look at collaboration – they're at daggers drawn with each other"* (FE Partner, Advisory Group member).

In contrast, partnerships that are better focused seem to have forged a culture that emphasises communication and trust which can transcend institutional boundaries:

> *"It's been one of the best projects I've worked on, it's been easier than some of the internal ones. Communicating with the university staff has*

been as easy as communicating with someone in the same building" (FE/HE Project Officer).

However, within the same partnership there are those who feel completely isolated:

> *"...there wasn't anyone to go to with our problems. We're floundering in the dark here – we don't know if we're going in the right direction until something goes wrong and a ton of bricks comes down*" (FE Project Officer).

Those who are closer to the hub feel part of the partnership; those on the margins do not experience it in the same way at all. The partnership cannot compensate for lack of management direction at a local level and there is a danger it can be used as an excuse for poor supervision and guidance.

(b) Central administration

The most effective partnerships have central administrators and ensure that this aspect of the partnership is well resourced. The benefits seem very clear. The administrator is well informed about all aspects of the partnership and is able to support the steering group and the chair. They provide a central focus for the partnership, facilitating and co-ordinating projects, and they can facilitate communication (e.g. via a regular newsletter). An administrator also contributes to a sense of identity, because the administrator is concerned to demonstrate the partnership is working.

> *"I see myself as more of a support to the Steering Group and also co-ordinating all the projects. Thirteen different initiatives which all need pulling together - a central contact. I chase things: reports, updates, budgets, and check that the money is spent wisely"* (Partnership administrator).

One partnership manager commented that it required dedicated administration support, as members cannot be expected to undertake such tasks in addition to their other responsibilities. It should be noted however that administrators are able to exert quite a strategic influence on the partnership and in some cases appear to have fair degree of autonomy, which they strive to maintain.

4.3 Building coherency

This section of the report examines three ways in which greater coherency can be developed in partnerships involving multiple partners, with different motivations and interests that need to be taken into account. These three approaches are developing a shared vision between organisations, sharing good practice and creating new institutions. These three approaches are suggested by Chataway *et al* (1997), but more significantly, were identified by members of regional partnerships as ways of building coherency. They are not mutually exclusive, but institutional constraints, funding and the focus of the partnership may limit their applicability in some instances. These strategies can be thought of as aspects of managing partnerships, but are discussed separately in this section for clarity.

(a) Developing a partnership identity through a shared vision

Ouchi (1980), in his influential paper "Markets, Bureaucracies and Clans" argues that in "clan" forms of organisations (which can be viewed as synonymous with partnerships) "the socialisation of individuals into an organisation" (p248) and "goal

congruence" (p252) are necessary to ensure that there is a shared vision. This point was made eloquently by one of the long-established partnerships:

> *"Partnerships are always the agony and the ecstasy, every single partnership goes through some agony but what keeps them together is some kind of common vision and common commitment"* (Steering Committee members).

Within this research, there appear to be conflicting notions of how partnerships establish and maintain an identity, and many partnerships do not even have a mission statement which is recognised by all partners. At a strategic level some are concerned that institutions commit to the partnership, and forgo local or institutional concerns:

> *"There are obviously from time to time little local spats that happen and I think as long as we're honest with each other and say we're not going to talk about that because it's not relevant to what we're doing. That's a business for our institutions – as long as we're here we're the partnership"* (Partnership Chair).

Other participants experience a fear that they may be swallowed up in the partnership and they must assert the rights and needs of their own institution:

> *"I'm not as centralist as the Chair is – s/he wants everything to be the partnership".*
>
> *"If you feel that you're just signing up to this group then small institutions will be very anxious indeed".*
> (Steering Group members)

The development of logos and letterheads is not sufficient in itself to brand the partnership and develop ownership - sometimes delicate negotiations have to be undertaken by which people feel able to give to the partnership yet retain a sense of autonomy. Often it was felt that it was individual initiatives within the partnership which had captured a public profile, and ownership existed at an operational rather than global level. It was sometimes difficult for project officers to feel that that they were working for the partnership rather than an individual institution:

> *"People still haven't got the mindset – they don't say I work for the partnership... The whole needs to be bigger than its parts, but we haven't got there yet. There is a tension there and at the end our loyalties are going to lie with our institutions"* (Project Officer HE).

Moreover, it is clear that partnerships are often heavily identified with the lead institution even in cases where the least powerful partners are saying: *"I would write Partnership in capital letters."*(Project Officer FE/HE).

A member of a partnership that believes it has a strong shared vision discussed how that was achieved, and what it meant to them:

> *"I think almost at every meeting it's discussed. The kinds of issues that are challenging are those that face us as individual institutions, and it's more about how we find ways of getting more than four organisations to do things and so (a shared vision) is inevitable. And I also think there is a dynamic in there as well, so I don't think it's a negative dimension.... Over the years we have sat down and had many*

discussions, so you might argue that it is implicit. But I actually think that because we have so many discussions that we are reasonably aware now of each other's feelings and responses and aspirations in that way, so I think that has developed as part of the project. We have a common purpose to help raise awareness, to help under achievement – we do this in many other ways too, with other groups but that is what we are doing, that's what we want to do and we come together and we do it. Widening participation is not about people's ability, but about barriers and we recognise that. We are part of the process that may create some of those barriers and I think all of us recognise that this massive underachievement in terms of engaging the vast population of [name of region] – we're part of the problem and part of the solution. We all agree that we can do something about it and agree that we must do something about it and we all share that" (Member of the Steering Group).

In general, partnerships felt that they had been given little guidance from HEFCE in building effective partnerships and that they have little knowledge about what partnerships in other regions are doing. This was an area where they felt HEFCE could be bringing partnerships together: sharing their experience and findings such as those produced by this research.

(b) Sharing practice within the partnership

In addition to developing a shared vision, a complementary approach to strengthening partnerships is by sharing good practice. Indeed, an advantage of working in partnership is the opportunity it affords for learning from other institutions. This learning can take place at both strategic and operational levels, but partnership members tended to refer to sharing good practice in relation to the latter rather than the former. Learning about good practice took place in more or less formal ways, and with differing consequences.

Learning what not to do – avoiding duplication

At the most general level, learning about other practices and initiatives in the region helps to avoid duplication of services. At best, this can be described as learning what not to do. One project officer commented:

"There are networks between FE and HE ... and between partner institutions and there is the cohesion element where we benefit. In some respects an overview of what's going on, people are informed about what FE's doing, what HE's doing, it allows us not to duplicate. Although that needs to be ironed out a little bit, if it wasn't there you would find that duplication of activities would go on I'm sure." (Project Officer, non-lead HEI).

Ad hoc learning

A more positive form of learning took place informally, where partnership members learnt about the activities of other institutions, and used this to improve their own practice.

"We are different institutions and we do have different relationships with FE colleges and we work with different departments and sections. If something works well and is applicable then it will be spread but I

don't think it's a case of trying to homogenise provision." (Project Officer, non-lead HEI).

As the example above suggests, in some instances the learning is between partnership members. A partnership member from an FEC described the process of sharing and learning: "*One person explains what has worked in their college, a second says what has worked for them, and then other colleges can synthesise these ideas and develop an approach that works for their own college*". Another project officer said:

> *"I think there are things our partner institutions do and do well that I wasn't aware of and through the fact that we have to engage with one another they will be our first port of call and will be happy to let us in."* (Project Officer, non-lead HEI).

In another partnership a member of the advisory board shares ideas between two projects that s/he is working in (i.e. sharing between a partnership project and a non-partnership project, and the learning is at the level of the individual). One project officer concluded that s/he did not think they would have achieved so much working alone, as the partnership provided *"models"* to work to, which speeded up the learning process:

> "*I didn't have to reinvent the wheel – the bicycle was there for me to get on and ride"* (Project Officer, HEI, non-lead institution).

Organised learning

A more co-ordinated approach to sharing good practice occurred in some partnerships, whereby events or working groups were set up with the explicit aim of promoting inter-institutional learning. Mechanisms for sharing good practice included: updates of developments at meetings, seminars, conferences, working groups, training for members and publication of an annual report which includes case studies and examples of good practice. In one partnership an 'Ideas Day' was organised, and one of the outcomes of this was to devise a range of mechanisms to share good practice and evaluation. The partnership is now seeking funding for this activity. The chair sees sharing good practice as an essential part of the partnership, as it has to be more than just a 'bidding organisation' if it is to have added value.

One partnership involved in the research had initiated working groups, which provided a forum for colleagues from different institutions to work together around particular issues inhibiting wider participation in post-compulsory education. Some practitioners reported finding these groups very useful, while others found that they did not really work. The conclusion seems to be that workshops and other formal mechanisms need to be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of different partners.

Standardisation/best practice

A final categorisation of sharing good practice moves a stage further than organised learning towards the adoption of standard practices by all partnership members, thus aiming to ensure consistency of services or experiences for learners (e.g. for a specifically targeted group) throughout the region or sub-region.

There was little evidence of partnerships going this 'far'. Indeed, some practitioners expressed concern whether such an approach was suitable: *"There is no such thing as a standard scheme you can drop into a school as they are all different."* (Project

Officer, HEI, non-lead institution). While other practitioners commented on the limitations of a lack of 'consistency' when a standardised service is intended to be delivered to learners and potential learners throughout a large geographical area.

> *"Up until now most of the training has been informal. This is during the team meeting, which is a question of sharing experiences with the other advisers – some is planned but some isn't really formalised. I have been banging on about a need for training so we're offering a consistent service so when we're offering advice on things like loans and things. The argument might be that in responding to people's needs you then go away and do the research and come up with the information pack, perhaps we've got more time to tailor it. Perhaps when we're a complete team we'll receive staff development. We definitely need procedures and we will need to be trained in how to use them, for instance methods of tracking clients...*
>
> *"... [Sub-region] is a very big area and we're all working in very different institutions so it can be a problem that we all come from such different backgrounds. I think we aim to provide a consistent service but I'm not sure we can do that. We are dependent on how the different institutions treat the project officers"* (Project Officer, non-lead HEI).

These comments suggest that in some instances standardised or best practice needs to become the norm for all partners, to help prevent some learners receiving a lower quality and less comprehensive experience than others.

Promoting the sharing of good practice

It was noted by a number of partnership members that trust between partners is required if institutions are to share good practice. Furthermore, the level of trust required is greater if institutions are expected to share experiences that go wrong too. If sufficient trust could be developed, partnerships could become, at least in part, an antidote to competition. When trust is developed, the partnership provides *"an excellent opportunity to take risks and see what works because the schemes are evolving. We are learning as we go along, and sharing this with each other"* (Project Manager, lead-HEI). This is the antithesis of competition, and is more likely to be in the best interests of the potential learners.

Partnerships themselves need to develop trust and create structures to facilitate the sharing of good practice. Furthermore, there are very few opportunities for sharing and learning between partnerships. One practitioner commented:

> *"I'm aware that there are a number of widening participation partnerships going on and I think that we should link up and feed off each other more. We don't really have any links as far as I know, well the university might be [linked] but I'm not, and talking to others would be helpful and interesting"* (Project Officer, non-lead HEI).

(c) Creating a bridging organisation

A third way of creating a coherent approach is to set-up a new organisation. Brown (1991) describes these as "bridging organisations". This is in essence what the majority of regional partnerships have tried to do. However in some instances a more formal bridging organisation has either been created or is viewed as desirable by

partnership members. For example, a number of the partnerships have tried to create a new identity by creating a name for their partnership that signifies that it is more than a collection of educational providers. In at least one instance a new umbrella organisation has been created, with its own name, stationery, premises, and website, and employing its own staff:

> *"Obviously having[name of bridging organisation] as the umbrella organisation has helped, and that we've got these premises here is good. I think because we've taken a regional approach this has helped individual organisations trust each other a bit more".* (Project Manager)

In the discussion above it was noted that in some partnerships there was concern about the consistency of the activities offered to potential learners who access the partnership in different geographical locations. This difficulty was discussed by the project manager, as well as project officers, and the key issue seemed to rest on the fact that the individual HEIs and FECs were responsible for recruiting and employing staff.

This particular partnership used a decentralised and democratic partnership model, with the same amount of money being devolved to each institution to employ a part-time staff member to undertake a particular widening participation role. The aim was to provide this service throughout the geographical area in which the partnership operates. A generic job description was prepared, and the project manager was included on the interview panel at each appointment, but institutions followed their own agendas, for example by making an internal appointment either to retain an existing member of staff, or to increase their hours.

> *"But that's been to do with the fact that recruitment is being done by the institution not by (the partnership). [Project Manager] has been involved in the selection panels, but I'm employed by the college, but I don't work for the college in the same way other people do, so it's an anomaly if you like. I think it would be better if we were all employed centrally by [name of partnership] because I think it would take away some of the control or the influence, and it's not always useful influence (that the individual institutions have). This is just a feeling I get from meetings that they have had difficulties" (*Project Officer, non-lead HEI).

In this instance the steering committee is not seen to have enough teeth, and thus institutional agendas and practices override those of the project: *"...they may pay lip service at the steering committee, but when it comes to on the ground I wonder if the message has got through"* (Project Officer).

In a separate conversation the project manager concluded:

> *"I think it might have made life a lot easier if we could have employed all of the advisors, had one employer for them all, and then farmed them out, that would have made my life a lot easier. For example they are all supposed to have a laptop but because of licensing laws we can't issue the same machines to all the advisors"* (Project Manager).

Such comments were supported through the experiences of project officers: "*It varies. I understand that [Project Officer] has had great difficulties in finding a desk, a seat, a PC! Others' presence has been resented like, 'What are you doing here, we're already doing that'*" (Project Officer).

Thus, it can be concluded that in some instances a more coherent and comprehensive set of activities to widen participation could be achieved via the creation of a new bridging organisation. Furthermore, this helps to limit the domination of the partnership by one body, the 'lead institution'.

4.4 Communication

The importance of communication has been alluded to in the preceding discussions. This final section seeks to draw these issues together to assist with the development of effective partnerships. Communication is important between partnership members, within institutions and externally. External communication involves links with other widening participation initiatives and education providers in the region, as well as passing information to potential learners and other intended beneficiaries. These three aspects of communication are now considered.

(a) Communication across partnerships

A primary advantage of the regional (or sub-regional) partnerships is that they provide a framework within which people can talk to each other. In regions or sub-regions where such a network did not exist previously, the partnerships are valued and seem to be more successful. As one project manager said: "*There's no other game in town for this cross [name of region] collaboration, so there is no competition between different partnerships*" (Project Manager, lead HEI). In the partnerships visited as part of this research, the significance of effective communication between partners was frequently referred to, directly and indirectly. The following is an attempt to identify the elements of a partnership that enhance communication, and conversely those that inhibit it.

(i) Neutrality versus competition and power

One way in which a number of partnerships explained good communication was by stressing the neutrality of the partnership. For example, one partnership was created in response to a (non-HEFCE) funding opportunity. The university acted as a 'meeting ground', with little or no vested interest in the original bid, but acting as a conduit. This contributed to a feeling of no competition between the partners from the outset, whereas if one of the other agencies had taken this role it would have been more contentious. Reduced competition may be facilitated by the fact that there is only one university in the sub-region where the partnership operates. The project manager felt that this made it easier to demonstrate neutrality, as he/she does not have to keep moving between the others. A lack of competition enables greater transparency, including admitting failure, and self-criticism. Conversely, an FE college member of another partnership commented:

> "*They find it difficult to criticise their own institution especially publicly - they keep their dirty laundry to themselves. In terms of collaboration it's very difficult if someone's not prepared to look at how things could be improved, not prepared to move forward*" (FE talking about HE).

In other partnerships there was evidence of competition, with "*different partners acting autonomously without informing the others*" and "*some cutting for their own institutions, self interested behaviour*" (Project Officer, non-lead HEI). A partnership member from an FEC felt that there was a difference in attitudes between further and higher education, with the former being more willing to work across institutions and sectors, while "*HEIs are very institutionally bound, very competitive with each other*" (FE staff member of Steering Group).

In one partnership it was felt that an important way to ensure that it remained neutral was through the choice of the chair-person for each of the various committees. For example, when a new chair of the partnership was required, it was agreed that the person should not be from an educational institution as this might fuel competition, but instead s/he was selected from a public sector support agency. In addition, sub-committees are chaired by representatives from different partner organisations, which enables the partnership both to draw on its strengths and demonstrate equality and neutrality.

This can be contrasted with feelings of inequality, in this case in the relationship between HE and FE:

> "*It's a hierarchical one and that's something which creates problems... There's a certain amount of, not hostility, but a distance between the two sectors which needs to be addressed and that's where we're looking at these FE/HE forums to break down barriers. There are pockets of very good practice where there are strong relationships but they have to be built up over the years*" (FE Project Officer).

(ii) Structure of meetings

In addition to the partnership being based on a neutral, non-competitive footing, the organisation of the committee meeting can also facilitate greater communication. A number of partners we spoke to stressed the importance of a relatively informal meeting structure (which perhaps helps to overcome a sense of hierarchy). One partner commented that the less formal "*advisory group has advantages over a more formal steering group in sharing information*". A less formal structure also allows partners to meet in other configurations, for example, for interest groups to develop to focus on a particular topic.

(iii) Attendance at meetings

Effective communication is facilitated by regular attendance of the 'correct' people at the various partnership meetings. In particular, there seemed to be a sense that further education colleges found it more difficult to achieve this. Some smaller colleges can find it difficult to release staff to attend the meetings, but more generally, there have been many changes in the FE sector, including the introduction of the Learning and Skills Council and the merging of colleges in some regions. "*Colleges have been through a constant restructuring processes and personnel are constantly changing. We have to keep trying to find the right person, as job titles have also changed*" (Project Officer, lead HEI). In addition, some staff have responsibility for other projects, which can make attendance at meetings more difficult (although there is greater opportunity for inter-project learning).

A further issue related to who attends meetings is their seniority. It was agreed that more senior members of staff have greater influence over attitudes and practices within their own institutions. One partner commented that the partnership has to be *"led from the top"* and that senior staff or *"leaders"* within institutions need to be seen to be working together, then everyone can see that they are doing the right thing and work together. The institutional re-organisation in further education has, at times, resulted in less senior members attending meetings which has had negative impacts on communication within their own institutions (discussed below).

> *"There's been a shedding of personnel from the meetings which has meant perhaps some of the people left are not as senior as they could be in terms of how they could effect change"* (Steering Group member).

(iv) Partnership has a clear function

Communication within the partnership appears to be facilitated if it has a clear function. This is assisted by building coherency, e.g. through a shared vision, sharing good practice or creating a new organisation, as discussed above. One partnership described how originally they had included a wide range of partners, but this raised problems regarding communication and shared interest.

> *"We now have a slimmed down constituency; the problem with the initial constituency was that everyone was on board, which tended to fall into two groups. The principals of the colleges who were very dynamic and powerful with their own agenda; and there were the others – providers of ancillary services, TECs, a careers advice company etc., who were trying to find a role for themselves... The tendency was for the partnership to be dissected by two sets of interest groups: those who wanted to drive things and those who didn't know what they wanted to contribute but who were frightened of missing something if they didn't attend"* (Senior Manager, lead HEI).

In order to overcome this problem the partnership has been re-formed on a number of occasions, usually in response to an external stimulus, but on each occasion with a clear focus. The current form includes all education and training providers, including those in the voluntary and private sectors, but there is a clear interest in learning. The emerging focus is now clearer in that it has "*nailed itself down as a consortium of learning providers*", with a view to developing a relationship with the LSC or other bodies it might want to have a "*voice with*". A clear focus should help to overcome confusion by people within the partnership. One person commented that there was "*confusion caused by all the different bits of the partnership, people were not clear what it does overall*" (Chair of sub-committee, based in lead HEI).

Not only does the partnership appear to need a clear mission, but others within the same partnership commented that collaboration is most successful when they are doing something focused, a project around which to build. Furthermore, the strategic function of the partnership needs to be maintained throughout its implementation and not forgotten after the planning stage.

(v) Partnership meets the needs of the partners

Regular attendance at meetings assists with communication, but people are more likely to attend meetings and contribute fully to other partnership activities if the partnership has a clear function which is of value to themselves and their own

institution. For example, some people commented that it can be difficult to work with FECs because they have *"project overload"*, and another person remarked: *"If they don't see immediate benefits for themselves they won't come"* (FE Project Officer).

> *"Partnerships have to work on a coincidence of wants; it may not be a very enlightened way to run a partnership but it's one that can work"* (Project Officer, non-lead HEI).

Once people feel that the partnership is of value to them and that it meets their needs, they are more likely to feel that they have a stake in it, and thus start to take greater responsibility for its success. Shared ownership tends to promote commitment, and people work harder to ensure that an initiative succeeds, and subsequently results in greater value added from the partnership.

> *"Sometimes partnerships are just developed for partnership's sake, and some people see them as a product in themselves rather than a means to an end... It is more helpful to have people who are genuinely collaborating because it is of value to collaborate"* (Project Officer, lead HEI).

(vi) Individual partners have clear roles

The research suggests that individual partners benefit from having clear roles (see above). This aids communication, and enables people to know what is expected of them. This is facilitated by the process of 'signing off' activities. This approach involves a formal agreement, which details what will be undertaken, by whom and when it will be done, which is signed off by each of the partners. This provides an action plan that all partners are signed up to and take responsibility for. There are examples of partnerships without such agreements that have run into difficulties when partner colleges have withdrawn. In some instances they have concluded that they should have thought more clearly initially about the roles and functions of the partners and set up an action plan at an early stage. The situation experienced by some partnerships, where it is clearly felt certain institutions are not pulling their weight, might similarly have been resolved in this way. It should be noted however that 'signing off' does not in itself ensure that partners fulfil their responsibilities.

(vii) Open and transparent decision-making

Communication is improved when all partners and associated staff have access to the decision-making process. This is facilitated if staff in each institution have a formal relationship with their institutional representative, and this can be enhanced by the nature of this personal relationship. In some partnerships however, the role of the 'management' or 'steering' group of the partnership is questionable, for example only requiring one-way communication. In one partnership, the project officers are required to report back to a sub-committee and the steering group of the partnership, but they do not receive direction from either of these committees. More explicitly, in another regional partnership, one person commented: *"The Advisory Board is a rubber-stamping body – most of the decisions are made in smaller groups which we don't attend"*. This lack of transparency about decision-making was not uncommon. In a third partnership, it was felt that the steering committee did not take account of the experiences and opinions of the project officers:

> *"There is a two tier system here which we are not entirely happy with... There's a steering committee and a very heavy one,"* then there are *"the other ranks, to which I find myself categorised for this part of the job*

and that is the ... widening participation officers who actually get it working on the ground ... and that's what I do... It's an interesting position to be in because in other parts of the university I don't have this 'other ranks' position at all".

S/he concluded that there is:

"*a separation between those who do and those who preside,*" and that "*those who preside are so busy they are not taking nearly enough interest in what is happening on the ground. My own manager has not visited one of my events this year. S/he knows what is happening. S/he is run off her/his feet and I do understand, but it might be nice occasionally to see someone from the steering committee actually turning up and saying gosh is this what you do... [It just needs the committee to attend more events and] to take on a commitment to see what is happening on the ground. To take an analytical and reflective view: we're all on the same track here, there's no diversion of ambition. What we have are different roles .... as soon as you have a hierarchy you have reactions and those reactions may be petty but they are very human. So we move from being something like a team, all involved in something very worthwhile to feeling like we have been disembodied to a degree and cut off from decision-making*" (Project Officer, non-lead HEI).

This division was noted in another partnership:

"I don't think there's much power at officer level. Nothing we suggest can be done without being sanctioned by senior management and implemented by middle management so you need an awful lot of people on board per institution to make things work - but that's happening" (Project Officer).

If decision-making is not transparent and clear, and people do not feel committed to the decision-making process, it is more likely that partnerships will be viewed as bureaucracies that waste time and detract from the task in hand, rather than contributing and assisting the process of widening participation. One senior manager commented:

"*You've got to play it dead straight though: you can't try to pull the rug from under people otherwise they just won't collaborate with you again. So when we put together the [partnership] bid we said you will have some money to employ a project officer, so they're not employed by us. In the past when universities got money they tried to hang on to it which is understandable...*" (Senior Manager, lead-HEI).

The need for transparency, or 'playing it dead straight' especially in relation to finances, was echoed by other partnerships. For example, the lead HEI claims to pass on the great majority of HEFCE funding to the partners, and does not see collaboration as "*a money making exercise for the university*", and they cover their internal costs only. The finance that is passed on to the colleges is intended to provide more resources for the students. For example, they don't keep money back for the university library, they pass that money on to colleges and say they must provide library resources with this financial support. This is a more practical solution. Not

only does it increase the college resources, but many of the students live too far away from university to make visiting its library practical.

(viii) Leadership qualities and interpersonal dynamics

In all aspects of communication, personality is cited as an important component of effective partnerships. For example, in one partnership there was a difficult situation in relation to one institution, and this was resolved through personal networks. Interpersonal dynamics amongst the partnership made a key difference in how well people were able to work together, and the tone was often set from the centre. Enthusiasm and a genuine commitment to widening participation were vital, particularly at an operational level, as the job was stressful and time consuming and in some cases shared with a number of other responsibilities. Generally people working in partnerships felt more or less happy about the communication, as a direct result of their personal relationships, e.g. with their immediate line managers. One person commented: "*I can liaise with the officers but that can be problematic - it depends which one.*" A benefit of the partnerships has been the development of personal relationships, and associated trust, between staff working in different institutions, for example between FE and HE, which in turn has enhanced efforts to widen participation.

(ix) Mechanisms to facilitate communication

There are a number of mechanisms that facilitate good communication. These include appropriate management structures, dedicated administration support and efforts to build coherency. These are discussed elsewhere in this report.

(b) Communication within partner institutions

Most HEIs, FECs and other bodies said they are involved in the collaboration to widen participation because their organisation has a commitment to these issues. (The funding is of course an additional incentive, as is noted above.) A professed commitment to access however is not sufficient to ensure effective communication about widening participation across the institution. In general, the work of the partnerships tends to be known about by discrete populations within each of the partner organisations. And, naturally, the knowledge of the partnership is much greater if people have had contact with and are involved in its work (but this can be actively encouraged). One interviewee differentiated between the 'partnership' and the 'project', saying that while the former was well known in the college, the latter was not. Some staff are sceptical of widening participation, and may be antagonistic, but it is widely agreed that: "*You have to work with the people who want to work with you – that's the reality*" (Project Officer, non-lead HEI).

This observation has a more general application, when it is considered that the institutional culture and mission impacts on the way in which the widening participation agenda is interpreted and the extent to which it is embraced. As one project manager commented: "*In any partnership although you are collaborating, obviously the institutional mission and view are going to take priority*" (Project Manager, lead HEI). Effective collaboration therefore requires flexibility and respect for the institutional mission and context. In another partnership similar sentiments were expressed: "*You have to know how far the institution's prepared to go – you can't work against them. For example if they're not interested in getting access students into their law courses but they do want to fill their nursing places then you*

have to work with that" (Project Officer, non-lead HEI).

A number of factors can be identified that help to raise the profile of the partnership and associated projects, and of widening participation in general, within the partner institutions:

- Senior staff promote the partnership; this can be done by active participation, visits to project work, or references to widening participation achievements in speeches and reports for example.
- Project/partnership staff have links with institutional widening participation committees, as this enables them to pass on information about the partnership activities and to learn about other institutional initiatives.
- Project/partnership staff act as internal advisors on widening participation issues.
- Project/partnership staff undertake 'in-reach' work within their own institutions. This can take the form of presentations, or discussions with staff (e.g. admissions tutors).
- There are widening participation 'champions' in departments within the institution.
- People are involved in specific activities, for example in one partnership subject specialists contributed material to a specific project, and in another partnership specialist sub-groups were created.
- Partnership events are publicised within the institution.

The extent to which these and other forms of internal communication occur within institutions is likely to determine the impact of the widening participation partnerships on institutional practice, and whether or not a culture of widening participation is fostered. A lack of strong leadership can be detrimental.

> *"Our biggest issue is getting partnership culture embedded in the institutions. People think we've gone native and are nothing to do with them...I honestly think that at times the VCs do not engage at all in this and they should do"* (Chair).

(c) Communication within the region (or sub-region)

It was generally agreed that links within the region (or sub-region) improved the efficacy of the partnership to widen participation, and that productive links are dependent on intra-regional communication. A range of advantages to working with other networks in the region and publicising the partnership were mentioned during the research. A regional perspective allows an overview of other initiatives and promotes regional information sharing. This type of knowledge avoids the duplication of activity, and the reinvention of the wheel: *"That will be one of the good outcomes I suspect... If you've got too many projects in one area you're doing the same thing, so it's making sure it's being done more strategically"* (Project Officer, non-lead HEI). It also facilitates regional or sub-regional planning, and thus a collaborative approach helps to ensure that the needs of the region are met.

Regional networks can assist more specifically in meeting needs through exploiting appropriate funding opportunities. For example, to bid for funds from the Excellence Challenge it is necessary to collaborate with schools, further education and higher education. And, because of the existence of the regional partnership, there are already links with relevant networks. A regional partnership can also assist with the co-ordination of external income in the field of education and widening participation. In

one region, European funding has been received by local boroughs, but this has not been co-ordinated at the sub-regional level to maximise its impact.

A number of ways in which intra-regional communication can be enhanced have been identified from the research:

- Members of the HEFCE-funded partnership are members of other networks, and thus share information. For example, a regional higher education association has a widening participation group, and interaction with this network is said to promote 'genuine dialogue' between the two partnerships.
- The partnership invites members of other networks to participate in its committees. One partnership made the decision that the project steering committee should be a strategic group which includes stakeholders in the region. It now includes representatives from the LEA, Learning and Skills Council, Education Action Zones, Careers Services, etc. Not only do these organisations have an interest in what the partnership is doing, but it is hoped that they will participate in the projects as well.
- The partnership creates a niche for itself that fills a regional gap. For example, one partnership recognised that there was a need to manage the newly emerging relationships between learning providers, Learning Partnerships (LPs) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Subsequently, the partnership reconstituted itself as a providers forum, operating between the LPs (which function at the local level and represent the needs of the learner) and the LSC (which undertakes strategic planning and funding of post-16 education and training in the region). As a forum of providers their plans are related to the strategic aims of the LSC and directed by the needs of the LPs. At a planning day, attended by the LSC, the partnership identified objectives which are related to the LSC's objectives and on which they can work collaboratively, and these objectives are also articulated by the LPs.
- A related approach is when the partnership responds to a regional or national issue (e.g. Curriculum 2000). One partnership responded to a 'need' created by the introduction of Curriculum 2000, which caused a great deal of uncertainty amongst many different players. The partnership provided the framework which allowed them to have a collaborative conference, bringing together representatives from different sectors to take this issue forward at a regional level.
- The partnership organises events which are open to policy makers and practitioners across the region (e.g. conferences and workshops). Similarly, the partnership provides other services or products which are of benefit to other professionals. For example, in one partnership a consortium of institutions created a directory of courses which has proved to be very useful to careers advisors and others.
- The partnership facilitates bidding for external funds. In one region the partnership became a "*flag of convenience*" for a number of developments in widening participation, and to assist with collaborative bidding for national funding.
- The partnership undertakes promotion of either its 'services' or those of its members. Some of the partnerships have sought to create their own identities, by the development of a brand name, which is promoted and used by staff involved in the project. This is facilitated by the production of a logo, letterheads, business cards, etc.

Despite the above list, which suggests that partnerships are actively engaged with other networks and professionals in their regions, in fact many of the partnerships are not very well known outside of their own immediate members (although in some instances the particular *projects* appear more well known). This is equally true in partnerships that have deliberately tried to develop their own brand name.

5. Outcomes of collaboration

This part of the report examines the outcomes of the regional partnerships that occurred as a consequence of the HEFCE funding. It is important to recall that a number of the partnerships pre-date the HEFCE call for collaborative bids, some of them substantially, and many of the partnerships are undertaking additional activities which are funded through other sources, including internal income and external bids. This part of the report is divided into three sections: the first looks at the pilot project or research phase; the second considers the link between first phase research and second phase activities; and the final section looks at the subsequent projects that were bid for and undertaken by partnerships (and which are still underway).

5.1 Activities in the first phase

The first phase appears to have taken a variety of forms, and the extent to which it was dedicated to research tended to be in inverse relation to the degree to which widening participation was already well established. For example, in those metropolitan regions where a history of practice had produced a strong sense of what the issues and target populations were, partnerships felt able to enter directly into developing, and in some cases piloting, project initiatives. In areas where widening participation had already been extensively researched, partnerships tended to see themselves as building directly on this knowledge. Rather than undertaking more needs analysis or mapping research they used the first phase for action research – piloting projects they knew they wanted to run.

In partnerships that were predominantly FECs, research seemed more strongly community based and attempted a needs analysis of groups who were traditionally unlikely to participate in HE. However, in more rural areas, where socio-economic patterns of disadvantage were less apparent and where widening participation had not traditionally been a mainstream issue, mapping research was used to establish a baseline of more traditional 18-25 participants:

> *"It has enabled us to challenge assumptions we had. It enabled us to be much clearer about where the areas were that were under-performing, so that with a finite amount of resource we were able to concentrate on working in those areas...I'm sure there are pockets of that knowledge. I think it's probably truer of metropolitan areas and this is a big issue for us. If you were working in Leeds or Birmingham you would know because of the socio-demographics* " (Chair).

In summary, three types of research were undertaken. These have been categorised as:

- Mapping activities in the region
- Research about specific target groups
- Piloting initiatives.

The chosen methodology for research was generally to mix methods: using quantitative methods to map participation and create a baseline, and qualitative methods such as focus groups to explore attitudes to HE within the target group.

(a) Mapping activities

In some cases this mapping worked well, for example when mapping identified hot and cold spots which were then used as locations for more in-depth research with the target group of 18-25 year olds and, in a separate focus group, parents and careers advisers. In this partnership the sense of urgency created by the short time frame had been very beneficial:

> *"Looking back at it, it was our best year because of the fixed time frame: there was allegedly no funding – it had to be completed"* (Researcher).

But in other partnerships the mapping research identified as part of Phase one still had not been initiated by 2001. For example, in one instance the chair of the steering group had taken responsibility for conducting the research, but perhaps due to her/his very senior position, had been unable to see it through.

In the majority of partnerships where mapping had been completed it had a direct effect on the strategic development of partnership projects, creating a clear frame and direction so that initiatives could be specifically targeted: "*Without that research I think it would have drifted quite honestly*" (Project Officer FE/HE). However, at an operational level it seemed that the research had not particularly permeated the practice of project officers even though they all acknowledged its worth:

> *"To be honest I haven't actually had that much info from Phase 1 to draw on with my project. There was a report which was published which I read when I first started looking for information, but to be honest I haven't really amalgamated it in my work"* (Project Officer FE).

A similar point was made in another partnership:

> *"The benefit from the first phase was to influence HEFCE to fund the [name] project, but beyond that it served no real purpose. We will target everybody so the information on widening participation collected by the research is irrelevant to the [name] project"* (Project Manager, lead-HEI).

It is worth noting that some partnerships felt they had had to search laboriously for statistics which they had expected to be readily available on a national level:

> *"It was quite fragmented, a very long-winded way of doing it. I was amazed that there wasn't a holy grail you could phone up and they'd say yes we can provide what you want down to age level, gender and socio-economic group"*(Researcher).

A similar point was raised by another partnership, which had invested £10,000 in identifying postcode districts that belong to the third or fourth socio-economic quartiles, and thus attempting to replicate data held by the HEFCE. The project manager feels very strongly that HEFCE is producing performance indicators and benchmarks based on the postcode methodology, and institutions are being monitored

against this, but HEFCE has not revealed where these areas are. S/he suggests that this research is therefore not an efficient use of public money as the data already exists.

(b) Researching the needs of specific target groups

Surprisingly few partnerships consulted the community about their needs, or the barriers they faced in entering higher education. Indeed, some partnerships, or at least members of them, were unclear about which target groups they should be focusing on. In some projects it was perceived as a benefit that they were including all potential learners (cf. Woodrow, 1998, and Thomas, forthcoming). Collecting people's opinions was not always easy. It has been noted above that FECs tend to have closer links with community organisations than HEIs, and that in general greater involvement of FECs as partners is correlated with more community-based research. This however was not unproblematic. In one partnership the FECs identified communities that they were working with, and the research team intended to conduct interviews and collect questionnaires from existing community-based learners to understand the barriers they faced in progressing to higher education. Unfortunately, in some instances the work reported by the FECs was aspirational, rather than developed, and thus learners were not available to participate in the research.

Some partnerships tried to understand the needs of their target groups via secondary analysis of data that was already in the public domain (e.g. surveys conducted by the Training and Enterprise Council and the Careers Service). This however tended not to provide sufficiently detailed accounts of under-represented student groups.

Another research approach that was frustrated was working with businesses. In order to facilitate the aim, the partnership included four industrialists in the steering committee. These partnership members enabled the research team to conduct interviews within companies, which generated some useful information. They also tried to contact other companies via a survey: "*We did some work with some businesses, having said that, they are notoriously difficult to actually involve*". This senior manager describes their 'success':

> "*Limited, in terms of getting some kind of feedback. I mean we sent out a survey to 800 businesses through the Chamber of Commerce and the response rate was three per cent. Business doesn't seem to think that it has any responsibility for this*" (Senior Manager, lead HEI).

(c) Piloting initiatives

One partnership intertwined research and developing initiatives to widen participation to certain groups of young people, as this discussion demonstrates:

> *"We were very pragmatic and we wanted to learn from it. Whatever we did we wanted to use it as a developmental tool and we spent a lot of time working that out, we didn't want to over do it – we wanted to make it achievable. The pilot certainly informed us that we raised people's aspirations, but then ultimately we were frustrating them when they actually got to the door. And we were able to determine that we needed to look at why we were frustrating them, and that set off what we wanted to do in the second phase."*
>
> *"It actually brought the problems into focus, because here was a group of real people who we worked with and who we enjoyed working with,*

and we realised we would probably not be able to see them through (HE) and not through their own fault."

"It sounds as though what you actually did was a form of action research. Why did you choose that route?"

"Because we know it makes a difference! We felt we needed to make a connection with young people and hear what they had to say. Although it's a cliché it's very much about working with people and not making it an isolated initiative. There is a degree of urgency in what we do and it's a significant investment that's been made, and we need to demonstrate that it can make a difference" (Members of the Steering Group).

This partnership had been working together for sometime, so during the first phase they set up a pilot project, which they then modified in the second phase as a direct consequence of the action research that they had undertaken (see for example Atweh *et al*, 1998).

5.2 Influence of research on project development

Although different activities occurred during the pre-project or research phase, this opportunity appears to have been appreciated by the majority of research participants within each partnership. Not only did it generate useful research findings, but a further benefit was the opportunity it provided for the partners to get to know each other and for trust to be developed.

Irrespective of the research and related activities that took place or the methodologies used, there were different links between Phase one and the subsequent Phase two widening participation projects. Our study suggests that there were four levels that categorise the interrelationship between Phase one and Phase two. Moreover, these different levels of influence could operate within the same partnership, either amongst different partnership members, or with regard to different research findings.

Firstly, the strongest link was in the case of partnerships where the Phase two initiative built directly from the Phase one research. One FE practitioner said that s/he found the pre-project research "*absolutely beneficial*". Indeed, this was identified as a major benefit of the partnership, and has strongly influenced the college's strategic planning in terms of how it develops its provision and what areas it should target.

Secondly, the research confirmed what was already known, which was seen to be of value, but the research did not directly inform the project. One partnership felt that the conclusions from the research underpinned the structure of the Phase two initiative, and that it provided "*solid confirmatory evidence*", that "*the issues they were looking at were the right ones*" (Project Manager, lead HEI).

In another partnership an access practitioner commented that s/he did not personally learn anything new from the research, but at the time it was very important strategically. For access champions within the institution it "*evidenced*" at a much more substantial level the issues that they had been trying to promote for a number of

years. This enabled them to use the research reports strategically to talk to: "*certain corners of this institution where there was perhaps less awareness, and use it as a weapon, a bit of ammunition, and I thought it was extremely important that we had this piece of research done. It has credibility and it has some externality and it added to the weight of the messages we were trying to get across which we weren't actually succeeding in doing very well at that particular time*" (Access practitioner, lead-HEI).

Thirdly, Phase one produced useful research findings, but these did not directly impact on the project (e.g. because it demonstrated that the original project idea was not viable). For example, the research with employers, discussed above, demonstrated that although there was a need for vocational education and training, working with business was not a viable way to widen participation.

> "*There are obvious skill shortages in certain sectors in this region, but ... where you've a low skill economy and a large pool of unemployed then it helps depress costs. Businesses are not keen on getting involved*" (Senior Manager).

One of the project workers commented:

> "*Although they tried to involve employers, the response was almost non-existent. This is because they're not interested because it costs something. I'm not targeting employers, although it is described as an activity of the [project officers]. I will be targeting the community centres.*"

The final scenario was when the research was not used (either because it was not completed, or because it was ignored). It is a matter of potential concern that at the operational level the research was largely ignored. For example, in answer to the question "*What sort of learners is the scheme targeted at*?" one project worker replied:

> "*According to the aims and objectives, the words second chance learners come to mind – people who are unemployed because they can't achieve due to lack of qualifications, but I think we've widened that now, it's available to everyone*" (Project Officer, HE College).

A barrier to the utilisation of research findings is related to staff turnover, which is a problem in projects, which tend to offer short-term contracts and little career progression. For example, in one partnership in the lead HEI the project manager was not in post when the remit of the Phase one research was developed, and s/he therefore is uncertain as to the purpose the research, or its relationship to Phase two.

Another barrier to an eff ctive relationship between research and practice may relate to the knowledge of the steering committee or other decision-making body. One project officer, based in an HEI (although not the lead institution) feels that the initial research was very useful, as it helped to focus the project and avoid wasting time, money and effort. S/he however is concerned that there is insufficient research in the second phase of the project to influence the activities that are taking place. Responsibility for this shortcoming is placed not with the researchers, but the steering committee, who are not seen to understand what research is. It is claimed that they are concerned with the collection of quantitative data, rather than encouraging a

qualitative research process to understand attitudes to higher education amongst the target groups.

In some instances the absence of, or lack of utilisation of, the Phase one mapping data in the second phase project did not seem to have particularly detrimental effects. In other regions, however, the consequences seem counterproductive to widening participation, working in areas which are already above the national average in terms of rates of participation in post-compulsory education and qualification levels. It therefore seems remarkable that there were no constraints that ensured the work of Phase one was completed before full partnership funding was awarded.

Those partnerships who felt that they knew what the problems and issues were and proceeded with implicit assumptions ultimately ran into difficulties. There was more fragmentation and overlap amongst initiatives, and obvious conflict and lack of clarity about what the partnership objectives were, even though it was commonly agreed that a great deal of good work had been done. A general sense of shared knowledge and political/philosophical beliefs about widening participation was not enough. There was a feeling that there should have been much more discussion at an early stage about the goals and vision of this particular partnership:

> *"These are discussions we haven't had yet, which is interesting. A lot of it's been on a nuts and bolts operational thing...the institutions need to think what it is that the partnership can achieve that they can't do themselves and focus on that* "(Project Officer HE).

It is also worth noting that research sometimes overturned seemingly 'common-sense' assumptions, for example that towns containing universities would have high rates of participation in HE. Assuming an informed consensus did not appear to make the best use of Phase one.

5.3 Second phase activities

A key objective of the second phase funding was to increase the number of enrolments of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education, either in HEIs or FECs, and to facilitate their retention and progression to ensure completion.

Most of the newly formed partnerships are not in a position to consider the impact of their collaborative activities. This section of the report therefore fulfils two tasks. Firstly, it examines aspects of a long-established and successful partnership in terms of working with FE to widen participation in HE. Secondly, it examines the monitoring, evaluation and tracking systems which are in place in other partnerships as an indicator of the limitations there will be to assessing the impact of this collaborative work in the future.

(a) FE/HE collaboration to widen participation

In order to demonstrate the potential for collaboration between further and higher education institutions to widen participation to under-represented student groups, a case study of one sub-regional partnership is provided. It is important to note that this is a long-established partnership, and many of the activities discussed below were not funded as part of the HEFCE projects that are the main focus of this report.

> *"One of the things about partnerships is I think they take a lot of*

working at, and it is a long term developmental process to become very effective" (Senior Manager, FE).

The aim of the partnership's activities in relation to student progression can be described as providing a "*continuous progression pathway*". The primary guiding principles appear to be synergy, and co-ordination and collaboration.

The partnership consists of a post-1992 university, a number of FE colleges and some specialist HE colleges. Within the sub-region there is also an elite pre-1992 university, and on the edges of the sub-region there are other new universities with a keen interest in widening participation and recruiting local/regional students. The lead HEI now has approximately 4,000 students studying HE in FE institutions, and this accounts for 15 per cent of its total student body. HE provision in colleges includes HNDs, full programmes and joint programmes, and now foundation degrees.

The aim is to develop continuous progression pathways. The lead HEI works with its FE partners to enable students to move from community provision, through FE and ultimately into higher education. For example, when they are promoting City and Guilds courses or diplomas, they do not 'sell' the course on its own, but promote the idea as the course leading to an HND. This helps to raise the aspirations of students, and assists colleges to promote their courses, as potential students interested in HND courses are attracted by the fact that there are structured links to degree courses within the university. This is also thought to be reassuring for parents who are concerned that some courses will not lead anywhere. This view is supported by the colleges themselves, who are keen to provide progression pathways from lower level right through to higher education level. For example, a manager from another college commented that "*...the whole college is geared towards progression. It's not enough now just to give someone the qualification, they have to be able to see that they can go forward. It's to our advantage if we get students coming in to the college onto level 1 or whatever to move them on if we can, but if they want to move onto another college or university we would be happy for them to do that.*" A new scheme involves community outreach, which will draw learners into an FE programme, and ultimately on to an HND programme with the opportunity for progression to a degree.

Continuous progression pathways are facilitated by:

- "*Ensuring that there is synergy and linkage between each stage of the curriculum*".
- Provision of advice and guidance to students.
- Visits and open days to the university by students, and visits to the colleges by university staff.
- Progression agreements with all partner colleges that recognise FE qualifications as agreed entry requirements, for example students on the City and Guilds Electronic Engineering course have a direct progression route into the first year of degree at the university.
- A letter to each student from the Faculty at the university informing them they have a place if they complete the course successfully reinforces progression agreements.
- The introduction of top-up degrees which are geared specifically to map onto HND programmes.
- The creation of a university HE centre within the college.

The overwhelming opinion from staff in colleges and the HEI was that transition from FE level to HE level studying is not problematic (it should be noted that as the research was conducted during the summer it was not possible to canvass the views of the students concerned). The university has created a Transitions Working Group to examine the ways in which students from FE can be supported once they arrive at an HEI. Within the partnership there is an HEFCE-funded research project to examine the transition and progression needs of students from HNDs to degrees and top-up degrees, and to identify good practice. The experience of individual students moving from one institution to another seems to be highly dependent on the faculty concerned, and even the course leader. Such students are coming in with different learning experiences from their peers. They may experience practical problems such as understanding the systems, and they may have to adapt to a different learning culture. The problems are magnified as students are increasingly entering courses at level 3, whereas previously they would have entered at level 1.

Transition is facilitated by:

- Improving staff awareness that previous course content may differ, and students cannot be referred back to previous course notes.
- Ensuring a better match between articulated courses.
- Providing an induction for new students, including details of how to use services such as the library.
- Providing an informal peer mentor. This is not a university-wide scheme, but one Faculty asks someone to take responsibility for individuals joining a degree programme part-way through.

The approach to working with FE partners exhibits elements of co-ordination, as well as collaboration, in order to overcome the potential problems of competition (see the discussion in section 6.1 about these issues). Most of the colleges within the partnership work only with the one university. This, according to the project manager, is beneficial for both the colleges and the HEI, and is a strength of the partnership. S/he feels that it is much easier for colleges to work with one institution, and it makes the university's commitment to each college much stronger. In this partnership there is one college working with another HEI, and s/he feels that this has been less successful. In terms of a sudden expansionary 'quick fix' it was good for the college but now it is difficult for them to determine which institution to work with for new developments. Similarly it is difficult for the university to commit to a college in this position because the commitment is not returned whole-heartedly. Furthermore, a centralised approach assists with sub-regional planning, and prevents divisive approaches *"with one college saying if you don't do it we'll approach somebody else"*.

The emphasis therefore is on co-ordination in the first instance. The lead HEI has an agreement with the other university in the sub-region, and their subjects are largely complementary. In addition, this co-ordinated approach requires a very transparent relationship with FE partners. The project managers describes part of her/his role as:

> *"...to walk a fairly careful path with our partners where I've started to see perhaps adjacent partners have both wished to get into the same relatively limited market and trying to encourage them to consider the totality of that market and by persuasion to look at a sensible pattern of provision across the area"* (Senior Manager, lead-HEI).

Co-ordination and transparency are also exercised in relation to finances. The greater part of the finance is passed on to the colleges to enable them to provide more resources for students. The senior manager describes her/himself as the *"honest broker"*. This is facilitated by building up strong levels of trust and respect between college management and the university: *"College partners know they can pick up the phone and talk to me in confidence about their plans without feeling I will go and tell their competitors... I am sitting between the university and the college and I am serving both the college's interests and the university"*.

In addition to co-ordination, the scheme involves collaboration built on synergy – a mutually beneficial arrangement, the outcomes of which are greater than a sum of the parts. For example the university feels that it has been able to draw on FE expertise to develop and move into new curriculum areas it could not have developed on its own. The colleges also feel that the relationship is mutually beneficial. For example, one FE institution was emphatic that the partnership is cost effective, and that there is a degree of autonomy and independence but also of synergy in the way it is operating. This has developed over a period and has come from a small number of courses and students and has progressively grown. Now the FEC has a "*critical mass*" of HE students and is collaboratively developing an HE centre within the college. This offers it status and a direct link to the university, and provides the university with a presence in a geographical area that does not have a local university. A senior manager in another college commented: "*We don't think we are in competition with this university ... I think it would frighten us if universities, they just had foundation degrees, and we weren't able to get involved in that because we would lose that angle*". This demonstrates that co-ordination and collaboration is working, but there is always a threat of competition.

The collaboration between an HEI and FECs operates to widen participation as most students seem to want to study in centres that are local to them. This is a semi-rural area, so without this kind of dispersed provision many students would not have access to these opportunities. It is argued that it is much better for the target group to go into local colleges – where they can, for example, work in smaller groups and start on lower level courses with guaranteed progression opportunities. As one person commented: *"One year away from home is a much more manageable task in terms of moving and cost than three years"* (Researcher, examining student progression and transition).

Key features of this partnership are:

- Long-standing partnership relationships.
- A dominant HEI, a large number of FECs and some specialist colleges.
- A shared desire to provide HE opportunities to all potential learners in the sub-region, thus there is an underlying motivation of mutual benefit or synergy.
- FE links to engage the community.
- A centralised model of management and administration, which is based in the university, and all co-ordination and communication emanates from here.
- There is not great emphasis on building coherency, but perhaps the centralised model is akin to the notion of a bridging organisation.

- The partnership does however have a clear function for all partners, that is of value to all partners, and that is primarily to increase student numbers, and this is facilitated by each partner having a clear role (co-ordinated centrally).
- Competition is overcome by co-ordination, which is largely transparent, although the 'power' does appear to reside with the HEI.
- The partnership has strong leadership and people appear to have good inter-personal relations.

(b) Monitoring, evaluation and tracking

The key finding of this research with respect to monitoring, evaluation and tracking students' progression was that these systems were largely underdeveloped or non-existent. The majority of projects had either not developed their monitoring strategy yet, and were waiting for the university's management information systems to be upgraded to cope with the new challenge, or monitoring and tracking were the responsibility of individual project officers.

For example, one lead HEI said that they were waiting for registration under the Data Protection Act, although one would imagine that the university in question was already registered to hold such data.

> *"We will record the students. We're not doing it at the moment because we're not registered under the Data Protection Act but we will be doing that very soon"* (Project Manager, lead HEI).

A number of projects were reliant on personal tracking, and comments such as these from practitioners were not uncommon: *"We've got follow up action on the back of each form and every fortnight I follow up and will call to check what they want to do"*. And: *"We will have something like a three monthly follow up conversation with them. There will be a personal element."*

Often monitoring and evaluation seemed not to have been thought through, and sometimes different members of the same partnership gave different explanations of how students' progress would be tracked, which perhaps indicates that this issue has yet to be implemented. In one partnership the responsibility for tracking had been delegated to further education college partners, but the project manager was not convinced that this approach would be successful.

This lack of monitoring and evaluation of widening participation projects is not a new discovery however. A survey undertaken by Action on Access, on behalf of HEFCE, found that only 30 per cent of projects had comprehensive monitoring schemes, and 40 per cent undertook no monitoring at all (Woodrow, 2001, p8). Previous research by Thomas (1998) identified five types of barriers to monitoring and evaluation by service-oriented organisations in the not-for-profit sector. These were: a poor understanding of what evaluation is; a lack of incentive to undertake monitoring and evaluation; the costs involved; lack of skills and guidance from external bodies; and a lack of time. Similar barriers were identified in this research with regional partnerships.

(i) Poor understanding of what monitoring and evaluation is.

A poor understanding of what monitoring and evaluation is can be evidenced by the

responses elicited to questions about monitoring and evaluation in this research, and the recourse to individuals keeping notes about the progress of individual students.

(ii) Lack of incentive.
Many people involved in work with socially oriented goals believe that their work is necessarily good, and that there is little or no need for monitoring and evaluation. This is illustrated by comments such as 'if it helps one person it has been successful'. One partnership for example explained that they were not *"chasing numerical targets"*, which was seen as an advantage of the scheme. Whilst the qualitative aspects of schemes are important, quantitative data is essential for hard project aims, such as increasing admissions (Woodrow, ibid).

It was pointed out in this research that an incentive for monitoring and evaluation can come from the top (i.e. from the funding councils or from institutions themselves), but without this incentive, less tracking takes place:

> *"I don't think we monitor enough. I don't think that HEFCE have monitored projects enough so universities tend to be a bit lax on monitoring, but this project is stricter so I would like to see the individual universities monitoring their part more"* (Senior Manager, non-lead HEI).

(iii) Costs.
The cost of monitoring and evaluation should be built into project proposals, and partnerships should be encouraged to do this to ensure that tracking systems are an integral part of their work, and not tacked on at the end.

(iv) Lack of skills and guidance from external bodies.
A number of partnership members commented that they did not have sufficient guidance about how to monitor and evaluate their work. For example, one project manager commented that *"...the Action on Access meeting [on monitoring] was very useful but came too late, it should have been part of the original bidding process"* (Project Manager,). In another partnership a practitioner said: *"We definitely need [monitoring and evaluation] procedures and we will need to be trained in how to use them, for instance methods of tracking clients"* (Project Officer).

(v) Lack of time.
There are two ways in which there can be perceived to be a lack of time for monitoring and evaluation. In the first instance, these activities are often perceived to be secondary to the main task of widening participation. But an important additional factor in these projects is the timescale. Widening participation is often a long-term activity, and outcomes tend not to be immediate. Thus tracking is compromised in short-term projects. For example in response to the question *"Will you be able to track them from FE into HE?"* The project manager replied: *"Yes, I hope so. Whether there will be many doing that I don't know, but if they follow an Access into HE course we will be able to track them but because of the timescale of the project we won't be able to track much more than that."*

(vi) Lack of data/appropriate methodologies.
A further complication arises in relation to a consortia of partners, in that a range of agencies is required to collect data. In one partnership they attempted to ascertain

what monitoring information was available to assist with the evaluation of their Phase two initiatives. A sample of schools was selected and each was visited in an attempt to gather data but it was not available; for example records had not been kept of who had taken part in activities.

6. Issues in regional collaboration

This section of the report examines some of the key issues and problems that were raised during this research in relation to collaboration with FE partners to widen participation. In particular three issues are addressed here: tension between collaboration and competition, debates about whether widening participation is best undertaken as a local or a regional activity, and the nature of the relationship with the FE sector.

6.1 Tension between collaboration and competition within the partnership

It was commonly acknowledged that there is a tension between collaboration and competition for those involved in partnerships:

> *"At the heart of widening participation are sensitive competitive issues around recruitment, but I think at the heart of this project is experience and so it hasn't got hung up on these. Other projects get bogged down in some of these problems and I think there is a common trust that we are doing things that are of benefit"* (Steering Group member).

The nature of the competition could vary: for example institutions might be in direct competition with some but not all of their partners. In one partnership, the fear of competition came from other HEIs:

> *"My concern is that if [old university] really get on the widening participation thing and decided to open their doors a little bit wider then our student recruitment might suffer. I think then as a region we are not widening participation, we are just reshuffling it. Whether we like it or not [old university] has the kudos that the rest of us don't have, that always is a threat if you like"* (Manager, HEI).

In other partnerships competition is perceived between HE and FE, as this comment suggests:

> *"We're all in the same boat and can work together...there'll always be a competitive element as well as a partnership element...we tend to put competition aside and just get on with the operational...there's enough to do"* (FE practitioner).

At a management level there were sometimes attempts to gloss over the competitive element but a more healthy approach was to acknowledge and work around this issue, recognising that competition for students need not be a bad thing if it encourages institutions to be more inclusive in their approach. For some, competition predicated the need for collaboration:

> *"Everyone in this day and age has to do this kind of work so why not enjoy it and have fun doing it as well. They have to because the environment for HE has changed. They're a business now and a lot of institutions can't bid for, organise or have the resources to do these kinds of things on their own"* (Project co-ordinator).

However, the same person was extremely critical of the way uniform collaboration was simply assumed at a strategic level: *"...people are too 'PC' and nice to each other when there are issues which need to be resolved"*.

Robinson *et al* (2000) in their discussions about 'inter-organisational relationships' consider that: "there are three 'ideal types' or modes for structuring inter-organisational relationships" (p4) and these are competition, co-ordination and co-operation. Each of these ideal types has certain characteristics that distinguish it from the others, and these can be used to understand the complexity of reality. It may therefore be useful to examine the combinations of these three that existed within regional partnerships.

As has been noted above, in some instances competition is seen as inevitable, as all institutions wish to recruit more students. Thus, there can be seen to be a combination of competition and collaboration. There are however some examples to be found of collaboration without competition. A number of partnerships noted that there was less competition than in other geographical areas as only one HEI was involved, and in one instance the fact that the university had been invited into the city was an additional advantage:

> *"I think the university is ... in a unique situation compared with other universities trying to develop a partnership... Well you come here with no baggage at all and oh you're in the city, the city wants you to be here. Whereas when we we're at [name of other site] we had a competitor next door as well and that made life very difficult and there was this feeling of unease generally. Whereas down here the city wanted the university to come here, has funded large parts of it and the city and county councils wanted it and it's made it a lot easier"* (Senior Manager, new university site).

A second, and perhaps more constructive way of overcoming competition is associated with the type of activities undertaken. Many partnership initiatives are targeted at young children rather than those at HE entry age and this can take the competitive edge off the proceedings. It was where projects targeted the point of entry to HE that there was likely to be significant conflict of interest. One partnership, involving more than one HEI (which may be viewed as similar institutions in terms of their recruitment profile) is developing a range of regional activities with younger children from Year 7 upwards. The aim is to develop pupils' awareness of and aspiration towards post-compulsory education from a very young age. But this is seen as a long-term process, which is best done collaboratively, as this reduces the amount of work each institution has to undertake, and there is no competition because there is *"no institutional label to that at all"*. The aim is not to 'sell' particular institutions, but to promote the idea of post-compulsory education.

The third approach to overcoming competition is via *co-ordination*, which is "a way to bring together disparate agencies to make their efforts more compatible (in the interests of equity, effectiveness and efficiency)" (Robinson *et al*, 2000, p7). For example, one partnership member commented: *"Well once we establish this database we can see who is getting who and what our patch is, this will help us to establish what each other does"* (Senior manager, non-lead HEI). This suggests that each

institution will have a clearly defined and discrete geographical area in which to operate, and thus they can effectively co-ordinate their actions so that they do not overlap (and thus competition will be avoided).

Some advantages of co-ordination can be demonstrated by the examination of a particular regional partnership. In the first phase this was the first time all the HEIs had come together, and they were all at different stages of development in terms of their access work. For some of the pre-1992 universities it was the first time they had really thought about widening participation in a serious way, and they were interested in identifying potential target groups. Whereas other HEIs in the region had been undertaking widening participation activities for a number of years, and their concerns related to developing more effective ways of reaching learners, especially the 'harder to reach' groups. The research brief was developed and agreed collaboratively, and then put out to tender, and thus specific research briefs were undertaken on behalf of the partnership by particular institutions (thus the first phase of this partnership utilised co-operation and competition). The research phase helped to cement the relationships between the partner HEIs, and thus they submitted a regional bid for the second phase. But having put in a successful bid, they then sub-divided for operational activities, and there are clear geographical boundaries. Thus, each HEI operates within an agreed geographical area, and thus competition is avoided.

There is further co-ordination at the sub-regional level, as the project is divided into a number of distinct strands, which different organisations take responsibility for.

> *"Each institution then has their own set of actions geared towards widening participation. If they are using the project well they are putting the two together to ensure that there is 'absolute synergy'"*
> (Member of the Steering Group, lead HEI).

The regional partnership meets a few times each year, and this facilitates dissemination, and thus they are able to exchange ideas and learning across the region, whilst being able to develop local approaches to working with communities and schools to widen participation.

In conclusion, there is an inherent danger of competition within collaboration; sometimes this may be constructive, but at other times it inhibits the overall goal of widening participation. Examining the type of activities that are suitable for collaboration may be helpful (e.g. collaboration is more appropriate when working with younger children); and secondly, seeing co-ordination as a complementary approach to collaboration when competition is inevitable. Finally, an important point was made that HEFCE itself sets up a tension between competition and collaboration within its funding mechanisms:

> *"One of the things that's very frustrating for us is joined up thinking. We're writing our widening participation strategies now and we don't even know if the partnership will be continuing. We've got young children running around our campuses and a time scale of just 18 months. You can't do widening participation in the short-term, you're in it for the long haul and I think HEFCE need to give us a better steer on that."*

"It's back to that collaboration versus competition. If you're encouraging collaboration on the one hand and on the other encouraging competitive bidding it's a nonsense" (Steering Group members rural partnership)

6.2 Regional and local needs

Partnerships differed in scale, some covering large rural regions and others being focused much more on a smaller sub-regional locality. In both cases it was seen as important that the geographical area was a recognisable entity, had its own sense of history and identity and, most importantly, capitalised on them which it was feared that some partnerships had not managed to do. In some instances project workers had been born and raised in the locality and demonstrated a fierce loyalty which sometimes led them to doubt whether those from other backgrounds could really understand the local culture. In large regions it was seen as very important to tie the partnership in with other regional objectives relating to industry and employment. Sometimes collaborative structures were already in place to make those links, which was of great benefit to the partnership. Then through the partnership they were able to win further funding (in several instances from European sources), thus creating a chain of opportunities for the region. Other partnerships drew in key agencies from the region to act as advisors to the Steering Group. This enabled them to be far more strategic in their planning and in maximising funding opportunities.

Nevertheless even within large regional partnerships, initiatives actually happened at a local level and in terms of involvement of potential students the local approach proved invaluable. Just how local projects need to be, was demonstrated by one project which had great difficulty drawing in students from outlying villages because of logistics and transport problems: *"We've probably lost 50 per cent of our first cohort. A lot of them live in small outlying towns and it seems difficult for them to get to us"* (FE/HE Project Officer). Across partnerships it was repeatedly shown that projects need to go to where potential students are. Once they can attract them at a local level the regional element can provide a gateway to further opportunities: *"A lot of our students are fairly insular and they see us as a kind of halfway-house, a stepping stone"* (Project Officer rural partnership).

Local provision is not only convenient in terms of location, but it is more likely to meet the other needs of learners. For example, Spedding and Gregson (2000) in their work in the north-east of England found that the "social relations of learning were perhaps the most crucial factor in decisions to come to, stay, or leave widening participation programmes of learning" (op cit, p14). By this they suggest that learning environments and student-tutor relations need to "look, sound, feel and smell close to home" (*ibid*). Indeed, where partnerships had identified lack of confidence as a significant barrier to participation, even FE was not local enough, and projects focused on centres in the community which were familiar and unthreatening. To reach the most 'hard to reach' groups, partnerships had to be prepared to enter their home ground.

In some instances it was felt partnership offered a rare *"forum where you could talk together without having to go through the boroughs or be constrained by the political or psychological boundaries imposed by the political structures here"* (FE/HE partnership). However, it was felt that individual localities were so different and

complex that only a micro level of practice would work. The regional environment allowed strategic planning and co-ordination (see above) to take place, and could facilitate sharing and learning between partners.

A steering group member from one partnership summarised these issues when s/he commented:

> *"I'd like to feed back to HEFCE that both strands are important – allowing institutions to do practical things in their own neck of the woods is crucial so people feel motivated, at the same time the regional thing is important".*

6.3 The FE/HE dynamic

Further education plays an interesting role in relation to these partnerships. FE is rarely a full partner: it is usually a stakeholder involved in certain initiatives or it is an advisor brought in to help the partnership target its initiatives. This is perhaps a function of time. One senior manager in an FEC explained how *"In the early days the university was seen as 'the parent' and the college was learning all the time. With time this has become a more equal partnership and this is a healthy developmental process"*. S/he commented that if this type of change does not occur and the contribution of colleges is not recognised in this way, colleges might decide not to work in partnership with particular institutions, but instead could operate as a consortium of FECs. *"There are a lot more choices available now that weren't available at the time of the original partnership"*.

Too frequently however, the FE partners are 'used', but they do not experience equal status within the partnership. Some partnerships however have come to regret this decision. The FE sector is seen as extremely important at an operational level but not at a strategic or research level:

> *"As far as strategy goes they don't play a role but at an operational level they are extremely important. Really the FE co-ordinator is the strong-pin of each project. If you don't have an FE co-ordinator who's on board and enthusiastic it won't work – no matter how enthusiastic the HE person is"* (Partnership co-ordinator).

There seem to be a number of pernicious assumptions at work across partnerships, such as *"they're not interested in the research element"*(HE Project Officer). From a FE perspective the relationship between HE and FE is experienced as *"a hierarchical one"* or likened to *"a divorced couple"* where communication is limited or non-existent (FE Project Officer). In some partnerships FE colleges may be more involved than small specialist HE institutions, but do not have equal partnership status:

> *"We are full partners but we are not very involved in the projects. There are probably FECs who are much more involved. It may be that FE and mixed economy colleges have more in common with the university than us"* (Steering Group member).

FE institutions see the partnerships as an excellent route for progression for their students and there appears no sense in which they try to withhold students from HE. Many partnership initiatives are developing transitional programmes to ease students

from FE to HE, particularly in areas where recruiting from the locality is imperative. Other projects try to simultaneously introduce children to FE and HE, building up their confidence and involvement:

> *"FE within the brain of the child and the parents as well is the next step, possibly feasible. HE is this thing floating around up here. FE has a far closer relationship with schools and you do get a broader spectrum of people going on to FE. The local familiarity and local relationship is the most valuable thing. I don't think it would work as well if FE wasn't involved because the gap's too big. To have university as the first step would push them over the edge"* (Project Co-ordinator).

Thanks to the nature of such partnership working, partnerships have developed some extremely successful examples of good practice (see section 5.3 of this report), which could certainly be operationalised more widely to provide stepping stones of progression through FE to HE.

7. Conclusions

This final section of the report attempts to answer questions such as: Does regional collaboration widen participation? And can regional collaboration to widen participation be sustained?

7.1 Does regional collaboration widen participation?

The overwhelming response from the partnerships that participated in the research is that collaboration is an effective way to widen participation (although there are some provisos). One partnership member summed up these views:

> *"Encouraging collaboration across the sectors is invaluable and should be encouraged, definitely!"* (Steering Group member from a well-established partnership).

In addition, survey respondents were asked if they felt collaboration was an effective use of funding. Only one respondent felt that it was not effective, describing collaboration as *"costly and time-consuming"*. Other respondents felt that collaboration *"avoids duplication of effort"*, facilitates *"shared good practice"* and *"provides better quality output than if FECs get funding direct"*.

Indeed, the evidence we have found suggests that regional partnerships have the *potential* to widen participation (see section 6.1 for example). The research phase provided partnerships with an important, and comparatively rare, opportunity to improve the effectiveness of interventions. However these benefits will only be gained if projects draw directly on the research findings. There are however a number of ways in which the collective efforts of partnerships can be more effective (see section 4 of this report). Furthermore, in order to understand and improve the impact of such activities, more robust monitoring, evaluation and tracking mechanisms must be built into initiatives (see section 6.2). The operational staff in partnerships are working extremely hard, and this needs to be supported by appropriate structures within institutions, and from the HEFCE itself. For example, a fundamental problem is the short-term nature of project funding, and the associated staff turnover, which mitigate against a number of essential elements of effective partnership working.

Some of these issues of sustainability are now addressed.

7.2 Can regional collaboration to widen participation be sustained?

Sustainability is a much used and debated term, but it relates to the longer-term impact of an intervention, and to what extent and how activities will continue in the future. There is a danger that initiatives to widen participation are short-term, and that the benefits do not last beyond the funding period so genuine change is not achieved. A member of one of the longer established partnerships reflected on the importance of a long time frame when asked about lessons for other partnerships:

> *"Hang on in there!! It's the stuff that goes on over years – the partnership takes time, it takes will and persistence really and there will be peaks and troughs. I think it is important here that individuals have stayed with it and I think that is a benefit which is not to do with personalities but commitment. And also to keep driving forward"* (Steering Committee member from a well-established partnership).

There is strong support within the partnerships that they should continue beyond the funding period. For example, one FE practitioner argued that it is important to work as if projects will have a long-term outlook because:

> *"Collaboration is seen as the future of widening participation... The more understanding between the sectors then the more benefits to the student. I don't see any benefits in even inter-sector rivalry, let alone cross-sector rivalry. There's a lot of mythology, especially around admissions, and the more clarity the more benefits to the student. With the LSC coming into force I'm sure we will see more of these bridges between FE and HE"* (FE member of the Steering Group).

There is also recognition of the need for an 'exit strategy':

> *"Either it's all going to die a horrible little death and we'll carry on networking informally, or we can start to think what is it that we want to get out of this and what would be useful about this and how could it add value. These are discussions we haven't had yet which is interesting. A lot of it's been on a nuts and bolts operational thing..."*
>
> *"... It's worked very well as a project in terms of the resources and what's been achieved in terms of value for money – lots has been done. Now we need to think a bit more strategically, about coherence and that's where a partnership like this could add value. The institutions need to think what is it that the partnership can achieve that they can't do themselves and focus on that, but it's a discussion that hasn't been had and I think it will [be needed] - sustainability will force the issue"* (Project Officer, non-lead HEI).

The main concern however is funding. There appears to be a general consensus that additional funding is required if partnerships are to continue:

> *"In terms of the over-stretched resources in both FE and HE I don't see how collaboration could go on without funding... In that respect these are really important initiatives that it's given opportunities like this and the feedback has been excellent"* (FE member of the Steering Group).

Another partnership member warned of the potential harm that could be caused by initiating activities to widen participation that are not seen through:

> *"I would say that long term stability is crucial for us and it appears on our agendas increasingly. We can't start anything off without knowledge of funding. The expectation is huge and you could almost do more damage without proper resources"* (Steering Committee member).

A plea to HEFCE:

> *"I think we have a commitment to widening participation, but we also need to have a commitment to the staff who dedicate their time to widening participation, and because of the funding we are restricted in what we can do. [Name of Project Manager]'s contract finishes in December and all her/his good work will stop then. I think it is important that we keep good staff and I would like the universities to make some commitment to funding a full time position so as widening participation keeps its regional aspect in this area. We need to be looking at where we go next. Will HEFCE be funding more projects like this? Without this kind of funding a lot of the activities that I do would not be possible..."*
>
> *"I am very keen to continue in widening participation after this project, so if anything can be fed back to HEFCE it is don't leave it till the eleventh hour, because we have people on contract and they start to get to the end of their contract and they start looking elsewhere. But we could retain some very good staff if we knew in advance about additional funding or projects in the pipeline"* (Project Officer).

In some instances the opportunities for further funding were recognised. For example, an FE practitioner feels that funding is an important issue, but the fact that the partnership enables them to submit joint bids and collaborative enterprises may help to ensure that they can continue working in partnership. S/he commented that it is useful to have an existing partnership:

> *"Bids take a lot of time and a lot of that time is in contacting partners and getting to know one another well enough to trust one another to put the bid in ... If you have already built that trust up over the years ... know one another's strengths and weaknesses ... it all helps to get the bid done so much more quickly"* (FE practitioner).

Some of the partnerships can already be described as 'sustainable' as they were in existence prior to the initial HEFCE invitation to bid for funding for collaborative projects, in some instances for many years. By examining these partnerships other aspects of sustainability become more apparent.

For example, in a partnership that was started some time ago, the current chair reflected on the lessons that had been learnt during this time. S/he noted that a partnership has to be focused on more than the 'project' otherwise it is highly likely to end when the project funding comes to a halt. Another factor is whether partnership members have picked up any 'spin offs' from working together. A third issue is the extent to which the partnership has a purpose for its existence. And finally, there

must be something in it for the partners, whether this is explicit or not. Although in theory this should be explicit, in reality organisations all have their different reasons. The former chair of the partnership reflected similar sentiments, when s/he noted that the partnership is much wider than the project.

The project manager from a far less well established partnership also identified the broader values of collaboration:

> *"Sometimes partnerships are just developed for partnership's sake and some people see them as a product in themselves rather than a means to an end... It is more helpful to have people who are genuinely collaborating because it is of value to collaborate"* (Project Manager, lead HEI).

Other elements of sustainability were less recognised (e.g. the value of sharing good practice and learning from each other, or the extent to which lessons from the partnership could be integrated into institutional practices. Many of the activities of the partnership did not incur direct costs.

8. Recommendations

8.1 Scope of regional collaboration

- There should be greater recognition of the tension between competition and collaboration within regional partnerships.
- Regional and local *co-ordination* rather than co-operation should be encouraged with regard to activities directly related to HE recruitment.
- *Co-operation* should be encouraged in *non-competitive arenas*, e.g. working with younger children and building links with 'hard to reach groups'.
- It should be recognised that there is a need for both regional and local activity, and funding and partnership structures should take account of this.

8.2 Membership

- Partners should be selected carefully to take account of the aims and objectives of the partnership.
- Partnerships should be encouraged to involve FE as full partners, and not to make assumptions about what they can contribute and how they can benefit from collaboration.
- Consideration should be given to involving community representatives in the management, research and implementation of partnerships.
- External 'observers' and members of other regional networks should be invited to join the steering committee to provide a broader context and to offer advice (e.g. in relation to regional strategy, funding opportunities etc).

8.3 Management and administration

- Time should be spent early on in partnership formation to identify a clear mission statement and shared vision, which is agreed in writing by all partners.
- Partnerships need a clear management structure, which is non-hierarchical and facilitates open and transparent decision making.
- Roles and responsibilities should be agreed in writing by the partnership and be 'signed off' by each organisation.
- Partnerships need dedicated central administration, and HEFCE should provide funding for this.
- Communication needs to be effective across partnerships within institutions and within the region or sub region (see section 4.4 for further details), and thus partnerships should be required to develop a communication strategy.

8.4 Building coherency

- Partnerships should consider how they are going to build coherency, and develop clear steps to do this (see section 4.3).
- Strategies for developing coherence within the coherence, such as an ongoing research strand, should be embedded.
- HEFCE should encourage partnerships to include mechanisms for the sharing of good practice, and provide funding to support such activities.
- HEFCE should facilitate inter-partnership learning, e.g. through the organisation of regional seminars.
- Partnerships should be encouraged and facilitated to examine their organisational structure, and if appropriate create a new bridging organisation.

8.5 Research and project development

- Pre-project research should inform initiatives and projects and it should continue into subsequent funding phases to ensure target groups are correct and are being reached.
- HEFCE should ensure that funded pre-project research has been carried out before approving further funding.
- HEFCE should seek to strengthen links between research and project implementation at all levels of partnerships.
- HEFCE should make available information on WP. This should include data to assist in identifying under-represented student groups and details of existing partnerships and projects.

8.6 Monitoring and evaluation

- HEFCE must take greater responsibility for monitoring, evaluation and tracking.
- Project funding proposals should address specific questions about monitoring, evaluation and tracking.
- Funding should be explicitly provided for monitoring, evaluation and tracking activities.
- Action on Access and HEFCE regional consultants should provide guidance about monitoring and evaluation systems.
- Training should be provided to practitioners and steering committees about possible approaches to monitoring and evaluation (this should take place *before* projects commence).
- HEFCE should consider developing monitoring, evaluation and tracking tools that could be adapted and used by partnerships and institutions to assess the impact of their widening participation policies and practices.
- Evaluation should be both formative and summative, and should utilise both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

8.7 Sustainability

- There is mismatch between bidding for funding and developing long-term approaches to widening participation, and thus partnerships should have opportunities to access more secure sources of income.
- Widening participation staff need greater employment security and career development opportunities, otherwise they will not continue to work in the field.
- Partnerships need to build sustainability into their strategic planning, and original funding proposals should address this issue, or alternatively provide an 'exit strategy'.

9. Appendices

9.1 Questionnaire distributed to lead institutions of all partnerships

Institute of Access Studies/HEFCE

Widening Participation: Evaluation of the collaboration between higher education institutions and further education colleges to increase participation in higher education.

Please complete and return to Sarah Williams, Institute for Access Studies, Staffordshire University, College Road, Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 2DE OR email sarah.williams@staffs.ac.uk

Name of Institution:

Contact Name:

Address:

Name of partnership:

Telephone:

Email:

The partnership

1. **Who are the members of the partnership? Please indicate, with an asterisk, those who you feel are the primary partners.**

2. **Was the partnership in existence before applying for this tranche of HEFCE funding? If so, for how long?**

3. **Why did your institution become part of this partnership?**

4. **What do you feel your institution gains from being a member of the partnership?**

5. **What do you feel your institution contributes to the partnership?**

6. **How were the partners identified? Please explain why.**

7. **Are there any other organisations or institutions you would like to see involved in this partnership? Please explain why you would like them to be involved and why they are not involved.**

8. **What do you feel are the main components of effective collaboration? Do you think these components are apparent in your partnership?**

<u>Aims and objectives of the partnership</u>

1. **What do you see as the overall aim of the partnership?**

2. **What are the specific goals of the partnership?**

3. **Have you met these goals?**

Regional context

1. **What are regional priorities for education and employment?**

2. **How does the HEFCE-funded work of the partnership contribute to these priorities?**

3. **Does the HEFCE-funded partnership work with other projects and networks in the region (i.e. who are not part of the partnership)? Please give details.**

Institutional Context

1. **What are your institution's widening participation priorities and how does the partnership contribute to these?**

2. **Has the partnership had any impact on institutional policy and practices? Please give details.**

Management

1. **How is the partnership managed?**

2. **Who is in the management team? Which institutions do members represent?**

3. **How often do they meet?**

4. **What is the remit of their responsibility?**

5. **What is the relationship at senior management level between your institution and your partner organisations?**

6. **In what ways is the partnership "formally" constituted (e.g. regular board meetings, minutes of meetings, AGM)?**

Strategies

a) Activities

1. **What activities does the partnership undertake?**

2. **Which activities are carried out specifically by your institution?**

3. **Which activities have been particularly successful in widening participation in HE and why?**

b) Target Groups

1. **What is the target group (or groups)?**

2. **Why are these groups being targeted?**

3. **How have you identified your target group?**

4. **How do you reach your target group?**

Success

1. **How many students have been recruited through this partnership?**

2. **What course type (i.e. FE or HE), qualification level and subject have these students enrolled on (please give as precise details as possible)?**

3. **Where have students enrolled (FEC or HEI)?**

4. **What do you feel the partnership has achieved that would not have been possible without collaboration?**

Retention and Progression

1. **What percentage of students recruited through this partnership is retained on courses?**

2. **How does this compare to the rest of the student body?**

3. **In what ways does the partnership support non-traditional students to enable them to succeed in education?**

4. **What percentage of students progress to the next level?**

5. **What mechanisms assist students to progress (e.g. from FE and HE courses)?**

Monitoring the success of the partnership

1. **What are the criteria for monitoring the effectiveness of the partnership?**

2. **What performance indicators have been used to measure the success of collaborative activities (e.g. contacts, enrolments, numbers progressing to next level, attitude change, etc)?**

3. **What evidence is there of success achieved so far?**

4. **Who is responsible for monitoring and evaluation? What methods of evaluation have been used?**

5. **Have there been any changes to the student profile as a result of the partnership? Please provide evidence.**

Funding

1. **Does the partnership receive funding from any other source apart from HEFCE? Could you give details?**

2. **Do you think collaboration is an effective use of the funding? Please state why.**

Issues and solutions

1. **What are the strengths of the partnership?**

2. **What are the weaknesses of the partnership?**

3. **Were there any unintended consequences or tensions within the partnership?**

Future of the partnership

1. **Do you see the partnership as long-term (please indicate timeframe)?**

2. **In the future, how will the partnership widen participation?**

3. **What changes in the partnership would you like to see take place?**

4. **How do you feel the collaboration process could be improved?**

5. **What are your long-term goals for the partnership?**

Can you please return to Sarah Williams, Institute for Access Studies, Staffordshire University, *College Road, Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 2DE*
OR email sarah.williams@staffs.ac.uk

Thanks very much!

9.2 Semi-structured interview topics

(a) Partnership

- How was the partnership formed?
- When was the partnership formed?
  - Who approached who?
  - Why were they selected?
- Would the partnership exist if there had been no HEFCE funding?
- What are the relationships within the partnership like?
  - Is there a hierarchy?
  - Who has responsibility for what?
  - Are members elected?
  - Are all member organisations equally represented?
  - Who chairs the partnership?
  - Is there a constitution?
- Are there any changes you would like to make to the partnership?
- In your view what do you think the partnership was set up to achieve?
- Who was it targeted at?
- How did you set up a common agenda?
- Is there a shared vision?

(b) Regional Context

- Does this region need a regional partnership?
- How do regional conditions impact upon the partnership?
- What other partnerships or networks do you work with in the region?

(c) Institutional context

- To what extent is widening participation a mainstream or marginal issue within your institution?
  - How would you demonstrate this?
  - What level of support does the partnership have at a senior level?
  - What kind of barriers exist within your institution to the partnership?
- What is the typical student profile of your institution?
  - (Does the institution recruit nationally, locally, mature students, ethnic minority groups etc)

(d) Phase 1 / Pilot Phase

- What type of research did you do?
  - What methodology did you use?
  - Why did you use this?
  - Did this differ from what you originally planned to do?
  - Did you consult the community?
  - Did you carry out a mapping exercise?
  - What student groups did you examine?
- What were the key lessons from Phase 1?
- What difficulties did you encounter in Phase 1?
- How did Phase 1 inform or influence Phase 2?

(e) Transition to Phase 2

- Has the partnership changed from Phase 1 to Phase 2?
  - How has it changed and why has it changed?
- What advantage has having the opportunity to go through Phase 1 conferred?

- What have you implemented in Phase 2 as a result of the research or mapping exercise in Phase 1?
- In what ways are the Phase 2 activities perceived to be successful at this stage?

(f) Recruitment, retention and progression in Phase 2

- How are you recruiting students?
  - How has this been informed by Phase 1?
- How do you support students to progress to HE?
  - How was this informed by Phase 1?
- In what ways do you support students to stay in HE?
  - How was this informed by Phase 1?
- In what ways has the partnership been particularly useful in relation to these issues?
- Have you shared good practice between partnership members?
- In what way could you not have acted alone to recruit, retain and support students?

(g) Issues and solutions

- Is there anything you would do differently now with the benefit of hindsight?
- Do you think your partnership has lessons that would be valuable to other institutions?
- Can you think of a word or phrase to express how you feel about the partnership?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

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11. List of abbreviations

HEI	Higher education institution
FEC	Further education college
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HE	Higher education
CVCP	Committee of Vice-chancellors and Principals (now Universities UK)
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment (now the DfES)
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LEA	Local education authority
LP	Learning Partnership

U.S. Department of Education
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